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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

A MYSTERY OF HIGH SOCIETY



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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NEW YORK, February 29, 1908.

Price Five Cents.

A MYSTERY OF HIGH SOCIETY;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S TANGLED PUZZLE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

A MYSTERY AMONG THE INFALLIBLES.

"You see, Mr. Carter, the thing has really gotten beyond endurance. We can't stand it any longer. Something must be done. We have kept these matters entirely away from the police, not so much that we wished the police to have nothing to do with it, as because we all desire to keep it out of the papers. Last night—or, rather, this morning, immediately after the reception at my house, five of us held an impromptu meeting in my library, and the result of it was that I was appointed a committee of one to wait upon you and ask you to take the case. But we want you to take it sub rosa. We don't want even an inkling of it to get out and to become known to those who are not immediately concerned. I'll be perfectly frank with you, Mr. Carter, and admit that we are all of us frightened at what may be revealed. In a word, the thief is one of our own set."

The detective nodded his head understandingly.

The speaker, Mr. Herbert Payson, was a gentleman of enviable social prominence in New York. He was a man thirty-five years old, immensely wealthy, and was closely allied to the oldest families on the island of Man-

hattan. Of his own particular set, he was the acknowledged leader, while his young and beautiful wife was regarded as the best of all entertainers, who was one day destined to become the arbiter of New York society. Her "week-end" parties at their country home during the season were functions to which every one was eager to be invited, and her bi-weekly salon was the rendezvous for all that was brightest and best and most exclusive in the city. Her beauty, wit, brilliance, and dash had become proverbial in Europe as well as in her own country.

Herbert Payson himself was not less popular than his wife. He was of the strenuous kind; full of dash and surplus energy. The best rider in the hunting-field, the best whip of his set, a keen sportsman in all that the word implies, and, above all, a jolly good fellow, who always had a smile and a cheery word for his acquaintances, whether it happened to be one of his own set, or a groom who served him. His servants adored him, his friends swore by him, and loved him.

It was rather a remarkable story that he had come to tell Nick Carter; a story of mysterious thefts that had been going on spasmodically for more than a year; a story of the inexplicable disappearance of valuable gems, rings, brooches, necklaces, collars, pendants, and tiaras;

the story of an unknown thief who dwelt among them, and who was so skilful as to have utterly defied all their efforts to trace the peculations to their source.

"You see," he continued, addressing the detective, who remained silent, in order that his client might talk himself out, "our own particular set, or coterie, is a most exclusive one. We are jokingly referred to as 'The Infallibles' by those who are just outside our clique, and who would like to get into it. We took the suggestion as a good hint, and we have organized a club which we call the 'Infallible.' It is a sort of quasi secret society. No person is ever admitted to membership unless at least ten of the members endorse the application, and if there is one objection offered, the name is dropped. We hold a reception and banquet once each month, to which only 'Infallibles' are bidden. It is really the walled city of New York society, into which none may enter who is not among the initiated. Have I made that more or less clear?"

"Perfectly so, Mr. Payson."

"Well, if I add now that the thief who has got us all by the ears is one of the 'Infallibles,' you will understand something of how we feel about it."

The detective nodded again. Then he asked:

"How many members are there of your society?"

"Fifty-two."

"It is a mixed society, of course? I mean by that——"

"I understand you. Yes, the women join it the same as the men, under precisely the same conditions, and are subject to the same regulations. Just now we are exactly evenly divided, there being twenty-six men and twenty-six women among the membership. We aim to keep it that way as nearly as possible."

"You elect officers among yourselves, of course?"

"Certainly. The chief officer, or president, we call the Arbitrer. The secretary is called the Scribe. Our treasurer is called the Capitalist."

"Thank you. I will ask you now, if you please, to give me an outline of the history of the robberies, beginning at the time the first one was called to your attention."

"Umm. I think the first one—at least, the first that startled us at all—was the loss of Mrs. Brandt-Forbes' necklace of pearls. That happened about fifteen months ago, and at her own home, the 'Beeches.' She was giving a week-end at the time, and none but the Infallibles were asked to it. You know—or possibly you do not—that she has one of the most beautiful places in this country. I was not present at the time, but I learned the circumstances of the robbery from my wife, who attended with a party of dear friends."

"Tell me about it in as few words as possible."

"Mrs. Brandt-Forbes has been a widow three years. She is still young and very beautiful. She is one of the original members of the Infallibles. She was about to

depart for Europe, to be gone something like a year, and it occurred to her that she would like to entertain the club before her departure."

"Well? Get down to the loss of the necklace, please."

"She owned a very beautiful and very valuable pearl necklace that was given to her by her husband only a short time before his death. She valued it so highly that she rarely wore it, but that particular Saturday evening in her own house, she brought it out and adorned herself with it.

"It was half-past two in the morning when she retired. The necklace was put in its case, and deposited in the top drawer of the chiffonier in her room. In the morning it was gone, and from that day to this there has been absolutely no trace of it.

"As I said a moment ago, I was not present at that function, and I do not now know just what measures were taken to recover the necklace and to find the thief. I only know that neither was accomplished."

"I am to understand that among the guests at that time there was no person present who was not a member of your organization?" asked Nick.

"Precisely that."

"And I suppose that, quite naturally, suspicion fell upon some of the servants, eh?"

"I believe so. I think that was the general belief at the time. However, so much has happened since that we know it was not one of the servants now. Possibly there were half a dozen thefts that were accounted for vaguely in that way; but we have at last awakened to the realization that the servants are not responsible, and that the thief is one of ourselves."

"I must ask you now if there is a breath of suspicion among any of you—among two or three of you, or even in your own mind, as to who that person can be?"

"There is no such suspicion. Personally, I have not one; not even a suggestion of one."

"Has your society ever met—at a full meeting, I mean, where every member attended, to discuss the thefts?"

"Twice."

"With every member present each time?"

"Yes."

"And as you looked around the room on those two occasions, was there no countenance there into which you gazed with even a suggestion of suspicion?"

"Not one."

"And yet you tell me that you believe now that one of those fifty-two persons present at those meetings was the thief?"

"Yes."

"You are all wealthy people, are you not?"

"There is not a male member of the organization who is not worth five millions, or upward of that; and every woman member is wealthy in her own right."

"Was it stated openly at either of those meetings that there could be no doubt that one of your own number could explain the thefts?"

"It was, in very plain language. I made the speech about it myself, at the first of those meetings."

"Tell me, in effect, what you said."

"I said that it was plain that one among us had knowledge of the thefts; that it was also plain to me, at least, that not one of them had been committed with the hope or the idea of personal gain; that it was also plain that the jewels so stolen could not be worn by the person who took them, if it were a woman, for the reason that they would be instantly recognized, and could not be disposed of in gifts if the thief were a man, for the same reason; that, therefore, it was a logical conclusion that the person who made free with the property of others did so either through a cruel joke, or by reason of an uncontrollable mania, and would therefore be readily forgiven if he or she, as the case might be, would stand up boldly, confess the wrongs, and return the jewels that had been taken. I stated also that I thought I voiced the feelings of others there when I said that we would not only forgive, but we would forget; that we would strive to treat that person in the future with the same consideration as in the past, and that we would look upon it as merely an unfortunate habit, like drinking too much, or indulging in the use of drugs, and that fifty-one of us would unite in a determination to restore that person to his or her right mind, and that we would all swear to inviolate secrecy forever."

"You obtained no response?"

"None whatever."

"Was there another speech of the same import made at the second meeting?"

"Precisely."

"And the result was, of course, the same?"

"Yes."

"The robberies have continued unabated?"

"Well, not exactly that. They were abated each time after those meetings. Long periods elapsed before there was another; and then each time they began again, seemingly with renewed energy."

"I take it that there was another such theft, or robbery, at your house last night. Is that correct?"

"It is. That is why five of us met in my library after the party; it is why I am here to talk with you to-day."

"I think, Mr. Payson, that I will do better in this matter if I select one specific case to follow up, than I would if I went over all of them generally. The last one is usually fresher in the minds of those concerned than what has gone before, so if you will give me all the details of last night's affair, I will see what can be done with it."

CHAPTER II.

ADELINA THE BEAUTIFUL.

"Last night's affair was another 'getting together' of the Infallibles," began Mr. Payson. "There were a few absentees, of course; there usually is; but——"

"One moment, if you please. There is a point upon which I wish you would dwell for a moment. It is safe to assume, is it not, that suspicion could not possibly point to any one of those who were absent last night?"

"Certainly."

"Very well. I will ask you, when you have finished your story, to give me a list of the names of those who have been absent at the times when other thefts were committed."

"My dear Carter, I will do that, of course, as far as I am able to comply with your request, but you must not misunderstand me in regard to one thing."

"What is that?"

"You seem to have got the idea that none of these robberies have been committed only at times when the Infallibles were together."

"You certainly tried hard to give me that impression."

"Well, then, I have unintentionally misled you. The thefts have occurred at all sorts of functions among what the public are pleased to term the "four hundred." It is only the fact that several of them have happened when *only* the Infallibles were present that has brought us to the unpleasant realization that one of our members is the guilty party."

"I understand you now. Who suffered by the incident of last night?"

"My wife."

"Your thief seems to take pleasure in stealing from the hostess each time; or so it would appear. The only two occasions you have mentioned have been those where the hostess was the loser."

"It is merely a coincidence that I should do so. If I am not mistaken, the two I have mentioned are the only times when the hostess has been the sufferer. As a rule, it has been one of the guests. On one occasion it was two of them."

"Two the same night?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me what it was that your wife lost last night?"

"A jeweled Maltese cross, made in the form of a throat-pin. It is set with one large diamond in the center—a four-karat stone—and there are eight others, each of two karats, one at each point of the cross. There are four rubies, four emeralds, and eight sapphires, also. It is one of the most beautiful ornaments I have ever seen. I had just purchased it and given it to her. It was the first time she had worn it. I gave twenty-one thousand dollars for it."

"Have you any idea how it was taken from your wife?"

"No."

"Has she?"

"Very little, if any. It being the first time she had worn it, she was naturally rather conscious of its possession. She tells me that she frequently put her hand to her throat, to discover if it was there, and she thinks she must have done that half a dozen or more times during the evening; but at last she felt for it, and it was gone."

"Where was she then, and what time was it?"

"It was soon after midnight. She had just disengaged herself from a group of perhaps a dozen of our guests, who had been standing in the middle of the floor rather excitedly discussing an incident that happened at the Meadowbrook hunt the other day. I need not go into that?"

"Certainly not. Does she remember when she had last felt for the pin and discovered that it was in its place?"

"She thinks that she had forgotten it since dinner, which was served at ten. We had only been a few minutes away from the table when she found that she had lost it."

"What was Mrs. Payson's attitude when she discovered that she had lost her pin? What did she do and say about it? At once, I mean."

"She was very angry, and she exclaimed aloud, so that all who were near her could hear:

"'Our thief has been at work again. This time it is my new Maltese cross that Herbert gave me. It is a shame! A shame!'"

"What was done then and there about it?"

"It had been previously agreed among us all that if another robbery occurred when the Infallibles were together, every person present should voluntarily submit to a thorough search."

"And was that done?"

"It was."

"Who did the searching?"

"My wife and I, having first submitted ourselves to the search by others."

"Your wife was searched also?"

"Certainly. It was argued that the pin might have fallen off and become lodged in some of her clothing, and therefore it was thought best to search her first."

"I suppose it was thorough?"

"As thorough as it could be made. You see, we have been through so many experiences of the sort that we are tired of it all. Each member is as intent as another upon discovering the guilty party."

"It was fruitless, of course."

"If it were not, I should not be here now."

"It was after that when you five, to whom you have

referred, got together in your library and decided upon engaging me, was it?"

"Yes."

"Tell me what you were instructed to say to me in your capacity as a committee of one."

"I was instructed to tell you that money was no object to us if you could untangle this mystery; that you were to search among us without fear or favor shown to any one, male or female. No quarter asked or given, you understand. That you were to start upon your quest with suspicion against every one of us, and that we will pay a reward of fifty thousand dollars for the discovery of the thief."

"That seems to be explicit."

"There is more."

"Well?"

"You are to have a card of invitation to the house of each member of our society; you are to be considered an honorary member of it yourself, and are to be received and treated as a regular member as long as you care to be, or, at least, until you have finished with the case. In other words, if you accept the case, you also become an Infallible on the instant."

"Of course, the thief knows by this time that I am to be engaged on the case."

"That could not very well be avoided."

"I understand. Is your wife at home now, Mr. Payson?"

"Yes. She is waiting for us. I told her that doubtless you would wish to return to the house with me and have a talk with her."

"Do you live in the house that was built by your father?"

"Oh, dear, no! I sold that four years ago, and built me a house on upper Fifth Avenue. My friends call it Payson's warehouse, because it is square and plain on the outside."

"Oh, yes; I know the house. It covers half a block on Fifth Avenue, doesn't it, and extends back much farther?"

"Yes; it is a very large house, and very plain from the outside; but it is exactly what Rena and I wanted. In fact, she did most of the planning herself, and I don't know how many weeks she must have put in with the architect before and while the house was being built. Will you go there with me now? My motor is at the door."

"Yes. But first I must ask you to permit me to take a friend with me. You see——"

"My dear fellow, you are to have carte blanche in this matter. You may take whosoever you will with you, at any time or to any place when you are on this quest."

"It is a young lady to whom I desire to present you, Mr. Payson. I wish her to know your wife, also, for I think that she can aid us in this search. I am re-

ferring to the wife of my adopted son, Patrick Garvan."

"Thank you. I, for one, will be glad to make her acquaintance, and I know that Mrs. Payson will feel the same about it. We will make her an Infalible also, if you like."

"I think it might be well."

The detective touched the bell, and when Joseph appeared, directed him to ask Mrs. Garvan to come to him in the library. A moment later, when she appeared, smiling and beautiful, Nick said to her:

"Adelina, I have called you here to present Mr. Herbert Payson. Mr. Payson, my daughter-in-law, by adoption, Mrs. Garvan. And now, my dear, Mr. Payson has asked us to ride to his home with him, to make the acquaintance of Mrs. Payson, who is in some trouble respecting the loss of a valuable jewel which I am going to try to find for her. I hope you have no other engagement, Adelina?"

"None at all. I shall be glad to go, thank you."

"Then we will start in ten minutes."

The moment that Adelina left the room, Payson turned upon the detective in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Carter," he said, "I wonder if you realize what a superbly beautiful woman she is?"

"Yes," replied Nick, smiling. "I think so."

"Why, she fairly took my breath away. There isn't another woman in the city who can hold a candle to her. I never saw such eyes, such hair, such a complexion, such teeth—so much real beauty in one woman. Your daughter-in-law by adoption, you say? I confess that to be rather a new one on me. How do you make it?"

"Well, I make it in this way. Between seventeen and eighteen years ago I found a lad who pleased me so well that I adopted him legally. His name is Patrick Garvan. We call him Patsy in the household. He occupies the place of my second assistant."

"Ah, yes. And he discovered this beautiful creature and married her; is that it?"

"That is it precisely."

"Carter, I never saw such a young woman; never, really. There is nothing like her in all the world. Why, if I should introduce her to our set, she would be the queen of the whole bunch in about five minutes."

"She would deserve to be so, Mr. Payson; for Adelina is as good as she is beautiful, and as bright and adaptable as she is good."

"I can well believe that. You don't mean to tell me that you are making a detective out of her, and—"

"No. But I am very fond of her, and I like to have her opinion of things. Her intuition is usually correct. I have found. As for making a detective of her, she has a natural bent that way, I have discovered. Her father, in Chile, is about ten times a millionaire, and she will

inherit half his fortune, so you see it is not necessary for her to work;" and the detective smiled.

"Well, you do wrong, you all do wrong to hide her light under a bushel. A woman with beauty like hers should go out among people, and—sort of get into the swim, don't you know, old chap."

"Possibly," returned Nick dryly, "her introductions among the Infalibles will be a starter in that direction."

"You bet it will! If you have no objection, I will see to it that it is."

CHAPTER III.

THE MISSING JEWELLED CROSS.

The drive to Payson's house in the big touring-car was a short one.

As they approached the building, the detective studied it seriously for the first time.

True, he had seen it before many times, in driving past it along the avenue, and he had more than once heard it referred to as "Payson's warehouse"; but he had understood that to be some sort of a joke, to which he was not "next," and had paid no attention to it.

Now, as he viewed the building, he did not wonder that it had been called by that name, for on the outside it might easily have passed for something of the sort, although it required only a glance to tell that it was a structure of a very high order indeed.

Nevertheless, it was square and frowning and forbidding, viewed from the exterior, and the detective caught himself wondering how a man such as he knew Payson to be could have been persuaded by his architects to erect such a structure.

The entrance was from the side street, and here all resemblance to a warehouse vanished.

Sumptuous elegance was the rule everywhere, after the portals were passed. Luxury of the ultra-fashionable and ultra-expensive, too, was on every side of them.

Liveried servants were at hand to relieve them of their wraps, for the month was January, and presently they were conducted to the library, where Payson said to them:

"I have brought you to this room as being, to my mind, the very pleasantest in the house. Mrs. Payson will be with us in a moment."

She entered the room even as he ceased speaking, and she brought into it with her a pervading atmosphere such as some individualities possess, and which are always felt at once when encountered.

"So glad to make your acquaintance, Mr. Carter," she said cordially, and with evident sincerity. "I have heard so much about you, you know."

She paused in the remark she was about to make, when her husband presented her to Adelina, and she actually blushed. This tried and experienced society

queen—even she—was dazzled for the moment by the remarkable beauty of Patsy's wife.

"Dear me!" she exclaimed, laughing melodiously. "One would think that I were an ingenue, and had never seen a beautiful face before. Really, Mrs. Garvan, you must forgive me; but you quite took me by surprise. How is it possible that you have been in New York for long and I have not heard about you?"

"I have been in New York but a short time, Mrs. Payson—rather less than a month; and I can't imagine why you should have heard about me, even had I been here a much longer time."

Again Mrs. Payson laughed, and there was something contagious in the way she laughed. All who were within hearing inevitably smiled with her. She had the reputation of being able to say things which, if uttered by others, would have been offensive, or at least in bad taste; but she could utter them without bringing about either catastrophe.

"Is it possible," she exclaimed now, "that nobody has told you how extraordinarily beautiful you are? There, there! Don't take offense, please. I am something of a privileged character with my tongue, as my husband will tell you. I am permitted to say things which are refused to others. Am I forgiven? Yes? Thank you. And now, before we wander from the subject of yourself, I want you to promise me that you will come to me next Wednesday evening. Will you? I am giving an informal evening then, and I should so like the privilege of presenting you to my friends. I will see to it that cards are sent to you and Mr. Garvan—and, of course, to you also, Mr. Carter. Isn't it a dreadful thing about my Maltese cross? I prized it so highly—and it disappeared so mysteriously."

Nick had been watching the play of features during this lengthened and somewhat disjointed speech.

Mrs. Payson was hardly less beautiful than Adeline, although she was of a different type. She was a young matron of twenty-eight, with two sturdy little sons in the nursery. Her hair reminded one of spun copper, her eyes were a dark, deep blue, with pupils so large that at times they seemed black. Her carriage was stately, her pose the perfection of grace, and her manner at once fascinating and bewildering.

"I suppose Herbert has told you all the dreadful story by this time, has he not?" she asked, before Nick had an opportunity to reply to her other question.

"Yes," the detective admitted. "He has."

"Isn't it dreadful that, out of fifty-two of us, one should be a thief? I suppose, Mrs. Garvan, that you have heard all about it?"

"Indeed, I have not," replied Adeline. "I do not in the least know what you are talking about."

"Truly."

"You will learn all about it in good time, Adeline,"

said Nick, interrupting. "And now, my dear Mrs. Payson, if you will be so good, I would like to have you reply to some questions."

"Certainly. With pleasure; if I can."

"It was last night that you lost the cross. Tell me, if you can, exactly where you stood the last time you raised your hand to your throat and felt that the cross was still there."

"Where I stood—when—— I don't think that I entirely understand the question."

"Your husband told me that it was the first time you had worn the pin. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And that therefore you were somewhat conscious of it?"

"I suppose I was. A woman is always conscious of such things, you know."

"Yes. And he also said that frequently during the evening your hand stole upward to feel that the cross was still in its place, or to caress it. Is that also true?"

"Yes. Decidedly so. I was rather ashamed of the gesture, too, I think. It seemed to me that it drew the attention of others to my bauble."

"Doubtless it did. Now, what I wish to know is where you were standing the last time you made that gesture, when you were conscious of the fact that the cross was still in its proper place. The last time you felt of it, before you discovered its loss."

"Oh! Let me see. You wish to know where I was standing and who was near me at that particular time?"

"Yes."

"It was just before we went into dinner—or supper, I suppose I should call it. I was talking to my husband at the time, and I think we stood quite apart from the others. I am sure we did."

"How long a time was it before you actually went to the dining-room?"

"Possibly half an hour."

"Now, if you please, begin at that point, and trace your own movements from then until the instant you discovered the loss. Carry your mind back to that time, and then take me with you through every motion you made from that moment to the discovery that you had been robbed."

"Mercy! I don't think I could do it possibly."

"Try."

"Well, let me think. I was standing—where were we standing, Herbert, when we talked alone together, just before going to the dining-room? Don't you remember that you asked me about—about a mistake you thought I had unwittingly made in pairing the guests?"

"Yes. I remember. We were in the red parlor."

"Oh, yes. Now I remember. I left you to go in search of Clara Burgoyne. She was staying with us the night, Mr. Carter. I found her in her room up-stairs,

and I remained there possibly five minutes, talking to her. I left her there, and——"

"Who is the lady, Mrs. Payson?"

"One of my oldest and best friends. We were school-mates, years ago, you know. She is the wife of Charlie Burgoyne."

"During the time you were talking with her in her room, were you at any time close enough to her so that she could have removed your cross if she had been so minded?"

"Good heavens, no! The idea of associating such an idea with Clara!"

"I know; but I have been specifically instructed to suspect everybody who was here at this house last night, until I find the one who actually committed the theft. For instance, did you kiss Mrs. Burgoyne on that occasion, or throw your arms about her, or she about you, or did she put any finishing-touches to your wearing apparel? In short, were you two for any cause whatever in actual contact?"

"No. I am positive that we were not."

"Where did you go when you left her?"

"I returned to my guests. They were scattered all over the lower part of the house, of course. I think I went to the drawing-room."

"Don't you know whether you did or not?"

"I am quite sure that I did so."

"And to whom did you talk then?"

"To no one specifically; to every one generally. My recollection is that I passed from one group to another, telling them that they had better find their partners, as dinner would be announced in a moment."

"Do you recall any actual contact with any person?"

"No."

"Who took you in to dinner?"

"Wat Mumford."

"Who was seated on your left hand?"

"Dickie Burdette. I remembered that I talked to Dickie most of the time, and left Wat to flirt with Ida Chamberlain, which he always seems anxious to do."

"Now, Mrs. Payson, was there at any time during that meal a moment or an instant when any person leaned toward you sufficiently near to have touched that cross without your being aware of the fact?"

"No; I am sure there was not."

"Did either of the gentlemen who sat beside you while you were at table call your attention to anything or any person in the room, and do it in such a manner that you were obliged to raise your head and look upward, or lean far over, or far back? Was there any such gesture on your part that you recall?"

"No, sir."

"Did any person pass around the table, in order to speak confidentially to you during the meal?"

"No."

"Do you remember how long a time you were at table?"

"It was approximately two hours. We went in about ten, and I think it lacked a few minutes of twelve when we came out."

"Did the ladies leave the gentlemen at table, after the English fashion, or did you all come out together?"

"We came out together, and not in pairs, as we went in, but in groups. I remember that we were all laughing uproariously at the time, over one of Dickie's jokes. He's always as solemn as an owl when he's telling them, and you never can guess what the point is going to be until he gets quite to it. It was even a better one than usual last night, and we were laughing heartily as we left the table."

"To whom did he relate the joke? To you?"

"To the table. To all of us. We always know that something good is coming when Dickie addresses the roomful. He does it, too, without raising his voice."

"Thank you," said Nick. "Now, am I right in supposing that it was only a few moments after that—immediately after you returned to the drawing-room, in fact—when you missed your cross?"

"Yes. That is correct."

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER FINDS A WAY.

"Mrs. Payson," continued the detective, "is there any suspicion in your mind whatever in regard to the person who might have taken your cross?"

"None whatever. Absolutely none."

"Are you in that condition of mind where you suspect everybody?"

"No; far from it. I suspect nobody at all; and I feel it my duty to say this, Mr. Carter: Even though it has been decided that some one among our own set is the thief, I cannot believe it. I have thought over the names of the membership of our little coterie very carefully, and there is not one among them toward whom I can entertain the slightest suspicion. I am of the opinion that when the thief is finally discovered it will be found to be one who is outside of our set."

"My dear, that is nonsense, and you know it," interrupted her husband. "We have all tried to believe that, Carter, but it is only begging the question. The thief is among us somewhere, and there can be no doubt of it."

The detective turned again to the hostess.

"There is always the possibility that you may have lost the cross," he said.

"Yes," she admitted. "I have tried to convince myself that it was lost, and not stolen; but, after all, that is folly, isn't it?"

"Why?"

"Well, the manner of its disappearance, for one thing."

"Have you had a thorough search made of the rooms?"

"Yes, indeed."

"You cannot, I suppose, suspect any of your servants?"

"No; but, even if I could do so, the fact remains that at no time between my knowledge of the possession of the ornament and my knowledge of its loss was a servant near enough to me to have taken it."

"I did not mean it in that way. But if the pin had dropped off, one of the servants might have picked it up and kept it."

"That is true, I suppose. I had not thought of that. Still, I do not think it could have dropped off. There is a tiny thumb-screw at the end of the pin, to hold it in place after it is adjusted, you know."

Nick turned again to Mr. Payson.

"Will you tell me," he asked, "if among all the ornaments and jewelry that have been lost during the year and a half that the thief has been at work, there has been one article found or traced afterward?"

"Not one, Mr. Carter."

"Then we are to suppose that the thief is either engaged in making a collection of such things, or that they are retained in secret in some place until such time as they can be sent abroad and disposed of in Europe."

"Yes; but I incline to the former theory. I think that this is a pathetic case of mania—kleptomania, I believe it is called. I suppose you know that if you have a tame magpie, or crow, which is allowed to run at liberty, it, or they, will steal everything bright, everything that shines, and will hoard their ill-gotten gains in some particular place."

"Yes, I know that to be true."

"I think this is a case of that kind. I think the thief, in this instance, is a sort of human magpie, who cannot resist the glitter of jewels any more than a magpie can resist the shining qualities of a pair of scissors, or eyeglasses. That is why we have kept the matter so secret. That is why we have called you into the case."

"I understand you. Have you, among your membership, any person who is an adept at sleight of hand performances? One who, on occasion, has entertained you in that manner?"

"Yes, Dickie Burdette."

"Where can Mr. Burdette be found right now, Payson?"

"At his club, I think. He is usually there at this hour."

"Was he one of the five who consulted with you in this room last night?"

"Yes."

"Will you drive me around in your car now, to see him?"

"With pleasure."

"Mrs. Payson, may I leave Adeline here with you while we are gone?"

"I shall be delighted to have her stay, and do you return to luncheon with us, with Mr. Payson. Will you do that?"

"Yes. I would suggest, while we are gone, that you two make another search of the rooms. I mean by that to go carefully over every spot where you walked last night, after you last knew the pin to be in its place, until you discovered its loss."

"We will do so, although it is a useless task."

"It might not be entirely useless. At least, it will do no harm to make the effort."

"Certainly not."

"Come, then, Mr. Payson. I would like to interview Mr. Burdette."

On the way to the club, Payson said to the detective:

"I would like to say a word about Dickie, Carter."

"All right. Say it."

"Your question relative to his powers of legerdemain, taken in connection with the fact of his relating one of his jokes as he was leaving the table last night, has drawn your attention to him. I want to say that I believe in Dickie as thoroughly as I do in myself, and that he is the very last one—"

"One moment, Mr. Payson. You are yourself at this moment as much under suspicion as is your friend Dickie."

Payson laughed aloud.

"All right," he said. "I think I understand you."

"If you do, you must know that I can only get on the right track in this matter by and through the process of elimination. There are fifty-two of you. I shall investigate the entire fifty-two, unless I hit upon the thief before I arrive at the last one. You have asked me to be suspicious of everybody, and also to be brutally frank in my investigation. I shall take you at your word."

The detective looked at the man covertly as he spoke, and was pleased to see that he had given no offense.

"I hope you understand me," he added.

"I do, thoroughly. I think you are going at it in the right way. Here is the club."

They found Burdette at once, and, without preface, Nick said to him:

"I want a short conversation alone with you, Mr. Burdette. Mr. Payson will excuse us." Then, when they had withdrawn to a far corner of the huge room, he added:

"I suppose you enter as heartily into this affair as Payson does?"

"I do, Mr. Carter."

"Will you look me in the eye and tell me that you are not the thief?"

"I am not the thief, Mr. Carter."

The reply was delivered as calmly and as coolly as Nick had asked the question. The man's eyes were clear and truthful; but the detective continued without comment:

"You were Mrs. Payson's companion at dinner last night, I believe?"

"No. I sat at her left hand; next to her. Wat Mumford was her companion."

"According to her recollection of the matter, her jewel must have disappeared between a moment that was fifteen minutes before dinner was announced; and the time when you had all returned to the drawing-room, after the meal. You were beside her during most of that time. Have you any suggestion to make concerning how the cross may have been made to disappear?"

"Not one."

"Do you recall that any one leaned over her at any time during the dinner?"

"No."

"Did you particularly notice the cross in its place at her throat last night?"

"I did, and admired it. I remember distinctly that it was in its place when we seated ourselves at the table."

"Thank you. That shortens the time somewhat. Do you remember noticing it after that?"

"No, I do not. But—I do think that I would have noticed its absence, had it not been there, when we arose from the table."

"But you do not remember distinctly to have seen it at that time?"

"No."

"Mr. Burdette, I am told that you are something of an expert at sleight of hand. Are you especially talented in that direction?"

"Why, yes; I believe so. It is a fad with me. I once paid the great Herman a large sum of money for instructions, and I have at other times taken lessons of both Heller and Keller. They told me that I might have made a good professional magician, had I been forced to earn my living."

"Thank you for your frankness. Now, answer me another one as frankly."

"I certainly will."

"Do you think that you could, if you so desired, have taken that cross from Mrs. Payson's possession last night without her knowledge?"

Burdette hesitated a long time before he replied. Then he said slowly:

"I don't think that I can answer that question literally. But I will say this: I could, if I wished, relieve the ladies of many of their jewels without their knowing it. Since another succeeded in relieving Mrs. Payson of her cross, I have no doubt that I might have accomplished it, also."

"Thank you again. Now, do you think that you could

get the Infallibles together at an early date? Without waiting for the regular monthly meeting and banquet?"

"Yes. Easily. I can have them all up at my country house Friday night, or Saturday morning, for a weekend. How would that do?"

"Splendidly."

"They like to come to my place, and only last night many of them asked me when I was going to open the doors of the 'Fells' again. I will send out the summonses—we call them summonses, instead of invitations, you know—at once."

"Will you include in your summonses the names of Mr. and Mrs. Patrick Garvan and my own, as well?"

"I certainly will."

"This is Wednesday. Can you get them together by Friday?"

"Easily. I think I can make it a point, too, that they shall all arrive Friday night, and not come straggling along Saturday morning."

"At all events, they will all be there by Saturday evening?"

"Yes."

"Now, another thing, and this is a very great favor to ask, because you run some risk in performing it."

"I will do anything that I can to assist you, Mr. Carter."

"Then I want you to do this: I want you, both evenings, if you please, to make use of your powers of legerdemain. I want you, in a word, to steal for me. I want you to help yourself to some one of the valuable jewels that will be there on each of the two evenings. I want you to make sure that you will not be caught in the act, too, for that would spoil my plans. But I do want you to succeed in getting at least one valuable jewel each night—and, as soon as you have got it, pass it over to me. Will you do that, Mr. Burdette, if you can?"

There was a long period of hesitation before the man replied; then he said:

"I don't exactly know what your motive is in asking this of me, but if you will take immediate possession of the articles I purloin, I will do my best—and I think I can do it."

CHAPTER V.

THE MYSTERY OF THE STOLEN BROOCH.

"My motive," replied the detective, smiling, "is to find the thief."

"Assuredly. I understand that. I mean only that I was wondering if you still thought that I might be the one."

This time the detective chuckled audibly.

"When Payson and I were coming to the club, a few moments ago," he said, "I told him that I should prob-

ably work this out by the process of elimination. If it will be any incentive to you to aid me all you can, I will admit that I have already eliminated you from the possibilities."

"Thank you. That is certainly a relief."

"My real motive is this: The thief knows as well as you and I know that I have been called into this case, and the thief, therefore, will remain very much in the background for a while."

"That goes without saying."

"Now, if you step into the breach thus made, if you succeeded in what I want you to do, the thief will be as greatly mystified as any one by the incident, and, unless I am very greatly mistaken, will manifest in some manner that surprise and mystification. He, or she, as the case may be, will at once leap to the conclusion that there is another thief in the bunch. At least, I wish to try the experiment. But, of course, this arrangement must remain an absolute secret between ourselves."

"Of course."

"Then I think we understand each other."

"Perfectly."

The drive back to the home of Payson was accomplished, for the most part, in silence; but just as they were approaching the house Payson asked the detective:

"Do you regard Dickie as a possibility, Carter?"

Nick turned on him like a flash.

"Mr. Payson," he said coldly, "I wish you to understand that as long as I am associated with this case, you must never again ask me such a question as that one. It is not fair to yourself, to me, or to the person about whom you ask the question. You are no more a privileged character in this affair than another. But since you have asked it, I will reply to it this once: I do not regard Mr. Burdette as one of the possibilities. I have eliminated him entirely. I have now only fifty left to eliminate."

"I'm sure I beg your pardon, Carter," replied Payson humbly. "You are right. I had no business to ask that question, but I thank you, all the same, for your reply. I will not err again."

They entered the house then, and found that the ladies had returned to the library.

"Well," laughed the detective, "have you found the cross?"

"No; nor a sign of it," replied Adelina. "We have searched quite thoroughly, too."

"Then I think, if you are all agreeable, we will drop the subject of the theft, and the cross, and all that pertains to it, for the present. Let us talk of something else while we are at luncheon. Are you especially fond of jewels, Mrs. Payson?"

"No," she replied demurely, "I do not think I am; and yet I suppose I am, too."

"She likes to possess them, Carter," laughed her husband; "but she is not inclined to set herself ablaze with them as some women are. She even asked me last night if I thought she ought to wear the cross. Renä is always conscious of her jewels when she has them on, and I don't suppose there is a woman in New York who has a finer collection."

While on their way home, an hour later, Nick said to Adelina:

"Well, my girl, what did you think of Mr. and Mrs. Payson?"

"I liked them both exceedingly," was the quick reply.

"Did you have a pleasant time with Mrs. Payson while we were away?"

"Very; a delightful time."

"Did she, for example, show you her jewels?"

"Yes, she did. I asked her to do so."

"How did that happen—that you should make such a request of her as that?"

"Why, we were talking of the lost cross, and she said that she had so many fine jewels that she really ought not to feel so badly over the loss of this one. I told her that I adored beautiful jewels, but that, having lived in Chile all my life, I had never seen many of the modern and more beautiful ones. I explained that ours, in that country, are mostly antiques. Shall I go on?"

"Yes, please."

"She said that she adored antiques, or words to that effect, and asked me to describe some of them—which I did. From that our talk led her to describe some of her own to me, and at last I asked her if she would not let me see them."

"Good. Now, how did she appear when she was exhibiting them to you, Adelina?"

"Eager. I cannot express it in any other way. I think she was more delighted to show them to me than I was to see them. She seemed to gloat over them. Once she said: 'I am sorry the cross is not here to show to you. It is too bad that I was obliged to lose it.' But I must add this: I do not think that her regret over the loss of the cross is in proportion to her eagerness over what she now possesses."

The detective smiled, and changed the subject partly. "You have one very curious and beautiful antique, Adelina, that is exceedingly valuable. I refer to that one which is made in imitation of the constellation of the Great Bear, or Big Dipper, or Plough, as it is variously called."

"Yes. It belonged to my great grandmother," she replied.

"We are to attend a week-end party up the Hudson on Friday. We will remain there probably until Monday. I wish you would take that jewel with you, and wear it at least one of the evenings while we are there. Will you?"

"But suppose I should lose it? You know we are literally going among thieves—or, at the least, I suppose we are."

"We are going where there is a thief, but I will promise you that, if it is lost, I will recover it for you."

"Very well. I will do as you ask."

"Patsy will be with us."

"If there should be any one present who expresses admiration for the jewel, don't hesitate to remove it and let it be inspected. Indeed, that is what I hope will happen; and, my dear, keep your eyes and your wits about you while we are there, for afterward I shall want to ask you a great many questions about it, and about the company."

"I will."

The invitations came that same evening, delivered by a messenger, and acceptances were returned; and Friday afternoon found Nick Carter, with Patsy and his wife, in the big automobile, being driven toward the country seat of Mr. Richard Ainsworth Burdette, near Tarrytown.

They arrived in time for dinner, and found that many of the guests were already there, among the early arrivals being Payson and his wife, Wat Mumford and his wife, the Burgoynes, and the Chamberlains.

During the late afternoon and early evening others came straggling in, until at ten o'clock Dickie announced that there were only four missing, and that he had heard from them all, to say that they would be on hand in the morning.

That evening there was bridge until ten-thirty. At eleven supper was served. Then there was music until midnight. It was not at all the conventional party that one expects at such functions. There was a free and easy air about it all, as if each person present were so well known to the others that they formed among themselves only a large family that has gotten together to enjoy a good time.

It was a few minutes past midnight when Ida Chamberlain went swiftly across the room to their host, and whispered excitedly:

"Dickie, I have lost my pearl brooch. Really, this thing is becoming unbearable. What shall I do?"

"I expect," responded Dickie curtly, "that you will have to do as the others have done—grin and bear it until we recover the whole lot that has been taken."

"But do you believe that we ever will recover them?"

"I am confident of it, Ida. There is no doubt of it. It is only a question of time. With Nick Carter among us and in the field, something is going to be doing, and that before very long. I have had a talk with him, and I know, You'll get your brooch back again. Don't you worry."

"Well, you seem mighty confident. I suppose I will have to believe you. Shall I keep the loss of it quiet, or

shall I tell? It always acts like a wet blanket upon us all when something is stolen in this way, you know."

"I think I will announce it. What have you been doing? Who have you been with who might have taken it?"

"Why, I have been with you most of the time. What is the use of asking a question like that, anyway? One can never remember just what one has done."

Dickie rose to his feet and strode to the center of the floor. As he did so, he shot one glance toward the detective, and received an almost imperceptible nod in reply. He knew then that it was safe to make the announcement, and that Nick, to whom he had passed the brooch after taking it, had already disposed of it so that it would not be found if a search were made.

"My friends," Dickie began, "I want you to listen to me for a moment. I have got another bombshell to chuck into your midst. Our friend the thief has been active again. Ida Chamberlain has lost her pearl brooch. Who has got it?"

There was a buzz of excitement, some light laughter, but no answer to the question, until Wat Mumford exclaimed:

"I reckon that maybe Ida left it at home before she came here."

"I did not," returned the young woman indignantly. "I had it on half an hour ago. I only just discovered its loss."

"Then you can rely upon it that the same fellow who has the other stuff has got your brooch. Come, now, whoever you are, own up. Confess that it is all a joke, in which you want to get us all by the ears. For you know it can't be anything else than a joke. There is not one among us who needs the money that such things would fetch. It is, therefore, all a joke, and we will accept it as such, only, for goodness' sake, whoever is guilty, confess the thing, and let us have an end of it. A practical joke is all right, but this one has begun to take on a serious aspect. We are losing patience. If you—whoever you are—will out with the whole thing right now, we will all promise forgiveness on the spot."

It was quite a speech. The longest one that Wat Mumford had ever made.

But for all of that, nobody came forward to confess.

"Shall there be another search?" asked Payson, from the background, where he stood beside his wife.

"Oh, hang the searching!" exclaimed Dickie. "I beg your pardon, ladies. You can all search me to your hearts' content, if you like, because I made that remark; but what is the use in doing any searching? It doesn't amount to anything. We have tried it before. If, as Mumford says, this thing is a practical joke—and I quite agree with him—it has lasted over a year now, and the joker ought to be satisfied. Anyhow, it won't be long before we get all our things back again, and I

move that, until we do, we try to forget it. What do you think about it, Mr. Carter?"

"I think," said Nick slowly, "that we had better have the search."

"All right. I'm willing."

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER MAKES A REVELATION.

It is needless to say, of course, that the missing brooch was not found, although Nick knew exactly where it was.

According to the arrangement between himself and Burdette, the latter had taken it and passed it over to the detective; and at the moment when Dickie made the announcement, Nick had taken his stand so that he could view every countenance in the room, and his glance flew from one to another like lightning when the statement was made.

Patsy, in another part of the room, and Adelina, at still another point, were equally alert, although Nick had not taken them sufficiently into his confidence to relate the exact status of the affair.

But he had told them that he believed another theft would be reported that night, and that when it was he wished them to be on the lookout for a guilty conscience.

On almost every face there was an expression of bored annoyance.

They had, for the most part, become so accustomed to this sort of thing that it had ceased to have the novelty of originality.

But the detective noticed two things that were worthy of consideration.

One was that, the instant when Dickie made the announcement, every woman in the room, save only one, brought one of her hands quickly to her favorite jewel, to discover if it were in its place. One woman there was who did not do that.

It might have been that she was more self-possessed than the others, or that she had already felt to see if her favorite ornament was safe. She might have done it before Nick's eyes rested upon her; but it was, nevertheless, a subject for thought.

The other thing that he noticed that was worthy of consideration, that he could discover an expression of real surprise only on one face.

Only just one among them all showed surprise; the others expressed only annoyance—and that one that expressed surprise belonged to the same woman who had failed to make use of her hands on a voyage of discovery when the announcement was made.

It was all significant, Nick thought.

"My friends," said the detective, as soon as the searching was completed, "you are all aware, of course, why I am here. Now, I want you to listen to a few remarks

I have to make. I have been brought into this case to discover the identity of the person who has for more than a year been making free with other people's property. Whether it is a practical joke or not, as two of the gentlemen have suggested, to me it is a plain case of theft, and I shall so regard it. I have here with me a blank warrant, signed and ready to fill out with the name of the guilty party when the name shall be discovered—and I wish the guilty party, who is even now within the sound of my voice, to listen and heed what I am saying.

"There is one among us here who knows at this moment where that brooch is hidden; and there is one among us—you would all say it is the same person, of course—who knows at this moment exactly where the jeweled cross is hidden that was taken from Mrs. Payson last Tuesday night. Wherever that cross and the brooch are hidden, it would seem likely that the remaining articles that have been stolen are also in hiding.

"I shall find them, just as I shall find the person who has taken them and concealed them. You must have no doubt of that. It shall be done. Now, I say to that person, would it not be better to confess all, here and now, than to wait until I unearth the secret and denounce the thief?"

Nobody said a word in reply. A dead silence reigned in the room after he ceased speaking.

All the time that he was talking, although he kept his eyes moving from face to face, they returned oftener to that one which had expressed surprise.

He saw that twice during his remarks she half-opened her lips, as if to speak, and then closed them again, with evident determination not to do so; and he knew that it was not a confession, or the approach to one, that trembled on her lips; he knew that it was only an impulse to reply to his suggestion that the person who knew where the brooch was also knew where the cross was.

He felt that he knew already where the thief was, only he had no proof, and it would be worse than folly to accuse that woman of it, unless he could prove his assertion.

There are no thieves in the world so adept at concealing their crimes as those who commit them impelled by a mania of some kind.

It is true that there are some kleptomaniacs who will steal things and then wear them boldly directly into the presence of the person from whom they were taken; but there are others who will deny and conceal to the very last gasp, and Nick believed this woman to be one of that kind.

It was not long after the search was made when the party began to break up, and the members of it to seek their various apartments; and so it happened that Nick found himself presently left with Dickie and Payson for company.

The former had said to him:

"Wait until the others have retired, Carter, and then join me in my 'den' for a good-night cigar," and Payson, who overheard the remark, said:

"I'll make a third, if you don't mind."

Of course, they did not; or, if they did, they could not say so; and accordingly, when they went to the luxurious "den," Nick and Dickie could not discuss the subject that was nearest to both of them.

But he gave them both a thrill of astonishment by announcing, almost as soon as they were seated:

"Gentlemen, I know already—or, at least, I am satisfied in my own mind that I know—who your thief is."

"You do?" exclaimed Payson, half-starting to his feet, and then dropping back upon his chair again. Dickie only smiled. He thought that Nick was referring to him.

"Yes," replied the detective, "and I feel it incumbent upon me to ask you both what ought to be done when I have proof to establish the guilt."

"There is only one thing to be done," said Payson decidedly, "and that is to denounce the man or the woman, whichever it is."

"It is a woman," said the detective quietly.

"All the same, there should be no mercy shown. If it is a woman, let her take the consequences of her acts. If she could not respond to the generous suggestions that were made to-night—that the whole thing would be regarded as a practical joke—then there is no reason for showing any degree of leniency; none that I see."

"Let us suppose a case," said the detective.

"Well?"

"Mr. Burdette is a widower, so we cannot pull him into the argument in the way I wish to make it; but suppose, Payson, that it happened to be your own wife—we may as well suppose that as anything else—would your answer still be the same to the question I have asked? Would it?"

"By Jove, Carter! that is hitting rather close, don't you know."

"Well, every woman in the party to-night is the wife or the sister of some man who is present also in the house. If any one of those men were asked the question I just asked you, do you not think that he would have replied very nearly as you did? That it was hitting rather close?"

"Yes. You are right."

"The thief is a woman. I am convinced of that much. If I am correct, then the woman is the wife, or the sister, or of one of your best friends. Do you still say that there is no reason for any degree of leniency?"

Payson shrugged his shoulders, and looked across the table toward Dickie.

Dickie, whose smile had vanished when the detective

announced that the thief was a woman, and who was now keenly alert, leaned forward and replied for Payson.

"Let me say a word," he said.

"Well? But wait a moment," replied Nick. "You two gentlemen are the only persons with whom I have privately discussed this unfortunate affair. I regard you as my employers in this case. I want instruction: how to act when the climax is at hand. I wish to know from you whether I am to make a public statement before all the Infallibles, or if I am to use my efforts to quash the thing, and to keep it a secret always."

"Carter," said Dickie, "what do you think had better be done about it?"

"I think, Mr. Burdette, that you had better give me the power to decide that question for myself when the time comes."

"I don't think that I quite understand."

"Well, I will be more explicit. I am of the opinion that if I find that the thefts have been malicious, instigated by avarice and cupidity, and carried out with the incentives and the motives of a thief, I should denounce the person who has done the stealing, and that you should all know who she is. But I also think that if I find that the thefts have been committed because of some insane desire to possess and gloat over the jewels, and that they are retained and not returned merely because of the dread and fear that follows the theft, I should have the power to shield that woman, and to bring her back into the correct paths of living; and that I should do it in such a way that not one among you would ever suspect who she was, or is."

"By Jove, Carter! Do you think you can do that?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure of your ground up to the present moment?"

"I am reasonably sure of it. I will admit, however, that there is a possibility that I am totally at fault."

"What do you think about it, Herbert?" asked Dickie of Payson.

"I incline to the opinion that we should permit Carter to do exactly as he pleases."

"And I quite agree with you. Then it is understood, Carter," he added.

"All right. Thank you. That is the manner in which I wished it arranged."

"I'm going to bed, fellows," said Payson, rising. "Good night."

As soon as the detective and his host were alone, Nick said to him:

"You did that very well to-night, Mr. Burdette."

"I'm glad you liked it," with an uneasy laugh. "I did not. I felt like the real thief when I was purloining that brooch; and I know that Ida values it above anything she has got in her possession. However, you have it safely cared for, so that it will be returned."

"Yes. And now I want to know if you think you can double up on the game to-morrow evening?"

"Double up? What do you mean by that?"

"I mean do you think you could swipe *two* articles to-morrow night?"

"Isn't that going it rather strong?"

"I suppose it is, but I have my reasons for making the request."

"Well, I hate it like poison, but if you think it is going to work out any good, I'll try it."

"I am sure that it will do that. It will put the finish upon what I have already learned by what you did to-night. It will enable me to discover, without the shadow of a doubt, who the guilty party is. It will enable me also to determine in what degree of guilt I must hold the thief. I have a plan in mind that will surprise you all, and the really guilty person the most of all. It only requires you to assist me."

"Well, you may count on me."

"I thought so."

CHAPTER VII.

THE JEWEL OF THE SEVEN STARS.

Notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, Nick had indicated to Patsy that he would like to speak with him and with Adeline before they retired, and accordingly he found them awaiting him when he ascended the stairs toward his own room.

"Now, Patsy," he said, when he had entered and closed the door, "I'll get to you presently, but I wish to question Adeline a moment first. Adeline, did you remember that I asked you, if there was anything stolen to-night, to watch the faces of the women in the room, in the effort to read what the different ones expressed?"

"Yes."

"You did it, eh?"

"Yes."

"Will you tell me the result of your study of those faces?"

"I read plain disgust in most of them; annoyance in all of them, I think; but I saw frank astonishment in one face."

"You need not tell me which face it was—yet. I saw it, also. Tell me how you construed that expression of astonishment."

"I didn't know how to construe it. I don't know now. I think, at first, that the expression impressed me as being one of incredulity, of unbelief; but, as the scene continued, the incredulity gave place to surprise, or astonishment, whichever you please to call it."

"What was the impression you received because of it? Tell me frankly, even though to you it may sound absurd."

"Why, it struck me at the moment that there might

be two thieves among these people, and that I was gazing into the face of one of them."

"Splendid, my girl. Now, from this on I wish you to pay particular court to that very person. I wish you to cultivate her for all you are worth. And this coming evening especially I would like it if you would remain with her, or near her, every moment that you can do so without attracting attention to the fact. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"If trouble in any form should come to her, stand by her all you can."

"Do you think, then, that she is the guilty party?"

"I am certain of it."

"But she did not steal the brooch, did she?"

"No."

"You know who did that?"

"Yes."

"Ah, I see. You instigated it purposely, to get that expression from the real thief."

"You have guessed correctly. Now, Patsy, what have you got to offer?"

"Nothing at all. I didn't happen to see the astonished woman at the right time to catch her expression. You might tell me who the woman is. To-morrow night I will watch her a little more closely."

"No. I think it better, Patsy, that you should work in the dark, as yet. There is always the possibility that I am mistaken."

"Very well. As you please."

Saturday was given up to all sorts of pleasures. Some of the party went abroad in the saddle, the day being an unusually pleasant one. Others went motoring. Another section of them took a long ride in the coach and four, driven by Herbert Payson. A few remained at the house, and occupied themselves at billiards, or in reading, or as fancy took them.

Nick chose to remain quietly about the house during the day.

Once, when he had the opportunity, he called Burdette aside, and said to him:

"I am more than half-inclined to try heroic measures to-night, but I am still a little in doubt as to whether it is the best thing to do."

"If you'll explain what you mean, I'll be glad to talk it over with you, Carter," was the reply.

"Well, I have thought of the plan of discovering the things that are stolen to-night, on the person of the woman I have selected as the guilty party."

"Suppose it should turn out that she is not the guilty party?"

"That is what I have been asking myself; and although I don't now think there is any doubt about it at all, yet there may be."

"May I make a suggestion?"

"I wish you would do so."

"Then why not this? There are to be two articles taken to-night; at least, such are your directions to me."

"Why not find one of them on one person and the other on another person?"

"What other person, for instance?" asked Nick, in reply, smiling.

"Well, you might discover one of the stolen articles on me, eh?"

"Would you be willing to stand for it?"

"Yes. I would at once take the position that the thief is now carrying the joke a bit farther, and is not only taking the articles, but is bestowing them upon others. Besides, I feel that we are approaching quite near to a climax, and in order to help it along, I'll take chances on being thought a thief for a few minutes."

"It might lengthen out to a few days."

"Well, even so, if it clears up this mystery, I'm willing to offer myself as a sacrifice."

"I'll think about it, Burdette. Have you selected your victims for to-night?"

"No."

"I suppose you prefer to wait till night comes to do that, eh?"

"Decidedly. I say, Carter; what a beautiful girl Mrs. Garvan is! The men are all crazy about her. I never saw such eyes and such a manner. No less than five different fellows have been at me to-day to ask me if I would sign an application for her as a member of the Infallibles."

"What about the women?" asked Nick, laughing.

"They seem to be as much struck with her as the men. Their names—hers and her husband's—are going in with yours to-night, as regular members. That's flat."

"Perhaps she might not wish to join, since there is a thief among you."

"Rubbish! The thief will be found out, all right, and something done about it. We have all sworn together that it shall not break up our club, and we'll stand to that."

"Tell me something about the program for to-night, Burdette."

"Some of the women have been getting up charades. They say they have enough good ones to occupy about two hours. That will take us till supper-time, say at ten-thirty. After supper, I don't know. I think I'll let events shape themselves."

"Good; if you will manage to have that thievery of yours accomplished within a very few minutes after we leave the dining-room, I'll engage to furnish entertainment for the balance of the night."

"That's so. I had momentarily forgotten that. I say, you couldn't manage to find that brooch somewhere

to-night, could you? Ida is all broken up about it, and it makes me feel like a cur, don't you know?"

"Perhaps. I'll think about it."

"By the way, I have invited the entire party to remain here till Wednesday, and they have all accepted, save only you and your party. What do you say to it?"

"I think it is well thought of; only it may be that I will have to return to the city for part of the day, Monday."

"That would be all right if you would return."

"Oh, I would return, all right. I am glad that you have asked them to remain. I had some such idea revolving in my own brain, only it had not taken shape as yet."

"Then it's a go?"

"Yes."

"And will you answer for the Garvans?"

"Yes."

"Now, have you any directions to give me, beyond what has already been agreed upon?"

"Not a thing."

The charades that evening went off delightfully, and some of them were ingenious. Adelina was found to be an adept at that sort of thing, and she was voted invaluable by all the party.

Nick, who had been covertly watching Burdette all the evening, wondering if he could catch him in either of the acts he had agreed to commit, did finally see him perform one of them. He saw him remove a richly jeweled pin from Mrs. Burgoyne's hair; and, even as he saw it, he had to admit to himself that it was so deftly done that if he had not been watching the every move of the man he would never have suspected it.

That happened just before the party were asked to enter the dining-room for the night's repast, and a moment later they all filed in together.

After a little, Nick happened to glance across the table toward Adelina, and he half-started with surprise, to notice, as he instantly did, that her antique jewel was not in its place. The jewel of the Seven Stars was missing.

"Confound him!" thought the detective, referring to Burdette. "He might have left her out of it, and kept the thing among themselves. But I suppose he thought it would be a nice little joke on me. I rather wonder, though, that he could get it away from her. It is time, too, that the redoubtable Dickie was passing those things over to me."

It was time, in fact, for the losses were soon to be discovered.

Just then Burdette happened to catch Nick's glance, and he made a motion with his lips which the detective plainly read to say: "In your pocket. Right side."

Instantly he dropped his hand into his right-hand

pocket, and there, surely enough, he discovered, not two, but three articles that did not belong there.

By the sense of touch, he recognized what must have been the pin from Mrs. Burgoyne's hair. He discovered, also, what seemed to be another brooch, while the third article was unmistakably a chateleine purse made of fine links of gold, which he remembered to have seen in the possession of Mrs. Mumford.

"Burdette has been busy, all right," he mused. "Here are three things, instead of two, as we agreed upon. But even so, Adelina's jewel of the Seven Stars is not here. I wonder if he has purposely held that back, or— Eh?" he asked himself. "Perhaps the real thief has been busy again to-night." The thought had no more than taken shape in his mind ere Mrs. Mumford started to her feet with a little cry of consternation, and then collapsed upon her chair again.

"What is the matter?" asked her husband.

"Nothing. Nothing," she replied.

"Nonsense! Something is the matter. What is it?"

"I have dropped my purse somewhere, that is all; and all my diamonds are in it. Go into the library, Wat, and see if it is there. I was in there just before we came to the table."

Before he could reply, Mrs. Burgoyne, from far down the table, cried out:

"More thievery, friends! My diamond hair-clasp is missing," and almost at the same instant Ida Chamberlain's voice rose in a wail, saying:

"And I have lost another brooch! It's a shame, a shame, a shame, and I, for one, will not endure it any longer. I insist upon a search being made at once, before any person can leave this room, and I ask that Mr. Carter and Mrs. Garvan be asked to do the searching."

Then, very quietly, but with a face that was pale and flushed by turns, Adelina announced:

"I, also, have been robbed. I have lost my jewel of the Seven Stars."

CHAPTER VIII.

THUNDERBOLTS FROM CLEAR SKIES.

For a moment after this announcement, consternation reigned supreme around that table. It was bad enough to have these terrible things taking place among them-

selves, but to have a guest robbed, almost before their eyes, angered them as nothing else in their unpleasant experiences had done.

And there was not a woman there who did not remember noticing and admiring the antique to which Adelina referred as the jewel of the Seven Stars. Some of them had asked to inspect it more closely, and all had agreed that it was the most unique thing they had even seen of its sort.

Many of them started to leave the table, but again Ida Chamberlain, who seemed to be a woman of unusual spirit and determination, called out:

"I ask every person at the table to keep their seats. This business has at last gone beyond endurance. Somebody at this table is the thief, and the thief ought to be discovered. Mr. Carter, will you search the men?"

"If it is their wish that I should do so—yes," replied Nick, smiling.

"Mrs. Garvan, will you assist me in searching the women? And will you search me first, and then permit me to perform the same service for you?"

"Certainly," replied Adelina, "if that is the wish of the company!"

"I think," said Nick slowly, "that I should have an assistant, also."

"As you please, Mr. Carter. You may select your own. I think, however, that you should take Mr. Garvan. You three are the only ones who are not in this at all. These thefts have been going on for more than a year, as you know, and you have only been among us two nights."

"Very well," said Nick. "If you and Mrs. Garvan will retire for a moment, and qualify yourselves as searchers by searching each other, the rest of us will wait where we are till you return. I, for one, have not finished my supper yet."

None of them had done so, and now some of them fell to again with feverish haste, but with diminished appetites.

This last development far outdid anything that had happened to them before, and they were all very plainly disturbed by it.

Again Nick had kept his eyes rather closely upon the woman who had shown surprise the preceding evening, and again he had seen astonishment depicted in her face when the loss of the several articles was announced.

It was only when Adelina had quietly stated her loss that the surprise was not there.

Also he had caught a look of wonder from Burdette twice, but both had evidently referred to the loss of Adelina's antique. Nick was sure now that he knew nothing about it, and that the real thief had taken it.

Adelina and Ida Chamberlain left the room together, and were gone a long time. When they returned, Ida announced:

"I wish to say to the ladies that we propose making a very thorough search. There will be nothing superficial about it this time. Mrs. Garvan and I have been down literally to our skins; and all who come under its now will have to submit to the same thing."

There were some murmurs of disapproval at this suggestion, but there were more in favor of it.

"Adelina," said Nick, rising abruptly, and crossing to one of the windows of the room, "I would like to say a word to you before you begin your duties; and to you, also, Mrs. Chamberlain, after I have finished with Adelina."

He pulled Adelina into the embrasure of the window, conscious that many eyes were upon them, but conscious, also, that they were only expressive of curiosity, and not of suspicion. If they had known why he called her there, they would have been surprised, indeed.

"My dear," he said, "I have three of those stolen articles in my own pocket at this moment; but I have not your antique. The real thief has got that. You know to whom I refer."

"Yes. What is the use in mincing words? You refer to Mrs. Payson."

"Exactly. Now, I want you to use your handkerchief, and then drop it to the floor. When I pick it up for you and return it, it will contain the chatelaine purse belonging to Mrs. Mumford. Do you follow me?"

"Yes."

"Manage to conceal it about you somewhere, and, when you are searching Mrs. Payson, find it on her, whether you discover your antique or not. If you do discover that also, so much the better. If you do not, you will at least have found this. If in your search you can dispose of it on her in such a manner that it will be Mrs. Chamberlain who finds it, better still."

"I think I can do it."

"I have managed to drop Mrs. Chamberlain's brooch—

the one she lost last night, not the one to-night—inside the gold purse. I wish you to remove it, and when you search Mrs. Mumford, find it on her. Will you do that?"

"I'll try."

She dropped her handkerchief as she spoke, and Nick, in returning it to her, managed to convey the purse, as well.

"That will do," he said, "save only one thing. You and Mrs. Chamberlain are to agree with me that, if anything is found upon any person during the search, the fact shall not be revealed to any other person until after the searching is all completed, and then it shall be told to a committee whom the company will appoint. Now send Mrs. Chamberlain to me, that I may tell her that."

Ida Chamberlain came to the embrasure of the window, and asked, in her piquant manner:

"Am I to receive instruction also, Mr. Carter?"

"Only in a general way. I think it would be well if you would be exceedingly thorough in this search you are about to make."

"I mean to be so."

"If you find anything at all upon any person, I want you to promise me that you will not reveal the fact until all the others have been searched, as well."

"What will be the use in searching the others, if I discover the stolen articles upon one person?"

"Oh, if you find them all on one person, there would be no necessity for further search, of course; but I hardly think you will do that."

"Do you mean that there is more than one thief among us?"

"No; but I very much doubt if the real thief has had time to dispose of the booty so that it may not be found. Failing to do that before the search, it is likely that the thief may have disposed of it, or, at least, of some of it, by placing it on the person of another, or two or three others, in the room. We will see about that after, of course."

"I think the idea is utterly preposterous."

"Perhaps it is; but you must remember that you are not as experienced in matters of this kind as I am."

"I know."

"Then, will you do as I say? I will do the same among the men."

"Very well. It shall be as you suggest, Mr. Carter."

"Thank you. I believe you will find that it will all turn out better so."

He returned to the table then, and, still standing, he said to them all:

"I think I may take you all into my confidence respecting what I have just said to the ladies. Mrs. Chamberlain has proposed that this search to-night be made very thorough indeed, and I quite agree with her about the necessity for that. A search that is not thorough is worse than none at all, because it is unsatisfying."

There was a general nodding of heads, and the detective continued:

"I have asked the ladies to keep the fact to themselves if they succeed in finding anything. I have asked them, in such case, not to announce it to anybody until after all the searching is over, until everybody has submitted to it. Then, if any of the lost articles have been found on any person, they, or we, as the case may be, will announce that such and such articles have been discovered, and after that, if it is the sense of this assembly, the names of the persons will be revealed to a committee of three, or four, selected by yourselves."

"You seem to take it for granted, Carter, that something will be found," said Wat Mumford.

"I have that feeling, Mr. Mumford; but I have a reason for it, also."

"Would you mind telling us what the reason is?"

"Not at all. It is this: I saw, and now remember to have seen, two of the missing articles in the possession of their owners only a very few moments before we entered this room. I am, therefore, of the opinion that the person who took them has not had time properly to conceal them from a thorough search. Now, gentlemen, if you are ready——"

"Aren't you going to submit to a search yourself, Carter?" drawled Burdette mischievously.

"Certainly, if the gentlemen wish it. I am at their disposal," replied Nick smilingly.

"Aw, what the devil's the use in searching Carter?" exclaimed Payson. "He hasn't been mixed up with us for a year. He isn't one of us at all, but is here to find out who the guilty party is."

"Very well, then," said Nick. "Payson and I will take you in alphabetical order, according to the first letter of your names. Mr. Anderson, you will be first; Mr. Ar-

lington will be next; then Mr. Bruce, and so on. As one returns from the room, another man take his place; and I warn you, gentlemen, that, as Mrs. Chamberlain expressed it, I shall go to the skin."

Try, if you can, to imagine the situation.

The men who remained in the dining-room while others were being searched joked and laughed at one another to their hearts' content.

When Anderson returned, after undergoing his search, Arlington, who was next, exclaimed:

"What's the use of my going out there? Of course, they found all the plunder on Anderson."

Bruce and Burns, and Covington and Dunlap, and Essington and Framingham, and so on down the list they went, each joking the others in their turn.

It was noticed that Dickie Burdette returned with a very grave face, and that he seemed to take very little interest in the joking that was going on about him. They attributed it to the fact that he was the host, and that it grieved him to have such things happen in his house.

Herbert Payson, who had been one of the loudest among the jokers, looked as glum as an oyster when he returned among them, and gradually the spirits of all fell to a point that was only a trifle above zero, seemingly.

Two of the women, Mrs. Mumford and Mrs. Payson, also looked distrait and troubled when they passed through the dining-room after the search, on the way to the parlor.

Little by little the almost herculean task was accomplished, and by the time it was over all the women were cross, and nearly all the men were irritable.

But at last it was done, and the two committees returned to the dining-room. Then the ladies were called back from the parlors, and the meeting was brought to order by the detective.

Nick had been for several moments in consultation with Ida Chamberlain and Adelina, and now, as soon as all were seated and prepared to listen, he said:

"My friends, I am prepared to announce that all of the missing articles that have disappeared to-night, save one, have been recovered; also that the brooch that was stolen last night has been found; but even although that is the case, I am afraid we are as far from a solution of the mystery as ever. As it is, however, I am prepared to return these articles to the owners," and he threw

upon the table before him the chatelaine purse, the hair-clasp, and the two brooches lost by Mrs. Chamberlain.

"And now," he added, "I will explain."

CHAPTER IX.

NICK CARTER'S WONDERFUL SKILL.

One might easily have heard a pin drop when the detective made this revelation.

All along both sides of the table, men and women looked askance at one another, until the voice of the detective arrested them again.

"You must not suppose," he was saying, "that all these articles have been discovered upon the same person. They have, in fact, been found in the possession of four different persons. The one article that has not been found is Mrs. Garyan's jewel of the Seven Stars, and that is doubtless now in the possession of the real thief—for that there is one real thief among you there is no longer any doubt.

"I will be even more explicit, and admit to you that the real thief is a woman. I only surmise it by reason of what I have seen, and with the aid of my long experience in these matters.

"But we will say, for the sake of the argument, that it is a woman. She is exceedingly clever at her profession, for to-night she has contrived to cast suspicion upon others—or, rather, she has so scattered suspicion that we don't know where we stand at all."

He picked up the gold purse, and held it aloft in his hand.

"This," he said, "is the purse that Mrs. Mumford lost to-night. It contains many of her jewels, though why she should carry them about in such a manner is more than I know. I believe, I hope, they are intact, but I do not know until she has examined it. But—Mrs. Mumford, have I your permission?"

"Yes," she replied.

"But if Mrs. Mumford lost her purse, one article of the stolen property was also found to be in her possession. The brooch that Mrs. Chamberlain lost last night was in the possession of Mrs. Mumford when she was searched to-night.

"Wait, please, do not interrupt me. The other brooch—the one that Mrs. Chamberlain lost to-night, I discovered in my own pocket. What do you think of that?"

There was a murmur at this, but he went on:

"When we were searching Mr. Payson, I pretended to discover it in one of his pockets, and then told him that I had found it in my own before the search began. Now, there is a circumstance that I want you to be thinking over while I continue.

"The diamond hair-clasp lost by Mrs. Burgoyne was found by Mr. Garvan, in the waistcoat pocket of your host. He could not account for it, and has not tried to do so. I, for one, do not think it is necessary. I hope you agree with me."

"We certainly do," exclaimed Mumford.

"This purse"—he picked it up and held it aloft again—"was found in the possession of Mrs. Payson, and Mrs. Payson was so shocked by the discovery and its possible consequences that she promptly fainted away. I think that she took it altogether too harshly, considering what other things were found in different places; don't you?"

"It's a cursed shame!" breathed one of the men, under his breath. "It's bad enough to have a thief among us, without having that thief try to put her crimes upon others."

"You are right, sir," responded the detective instantly. "It is bad enough to have a thief preying upon you, without having that thief making efforts to fasten her crimes upon others. That is the worst kind of crime, I think. To steal and then to put the stolen property into the pockets of innocent persons. It is awful! It is horrible!"

He was silent a moment, looking around from face to face, as they were turned toward him.

There was not one among them, on the women's side of the table, which was not pale and drawn. They all felt the excitement of the moment, and everybody in that room was impressed by the thought that the detective knew more than he was telling.

His next words clinched that impression.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said solemnly, "I know who the real thief is. I know her name. She is listening to my voice now, and she is wondering if I speak the truth, or if I am only bluffing. But it is the truth I speak. I know her.

"Somewhere, concealed about this house, is the jewel of the Seven Stars taken from Mrs. Garvan to-night. It is so beautiful that the thief could not give it up when she so deftly disposed of the other stolen articles. She

retained that, thinking, no doubt, that she might easily keep that, since she returned the other things, or contrived so that they would be restored to their owners.

"But we will pass from that for a moment, for I have another and a different thing to say.

"Mr. Burdette has asked us all to remain with him as his guests till Wednesday. As I understand it, all have agreed to do so. So far as I am concerned, I have only stipulated that I must return to New York for a few hours on Monday, but I think now that I will go to-morrow, because what I have to do can just as well be done then. Would you like me to tell you what it is that I intend to do?"

"Yes," they murmured, all the way down the double line of faces.

"I am going to obtain the proofs of the guilt of the real thief. I am going to the spot where all the stolen property that has been taken from you during the past year is concealed. I am going to recover it all and bring it back to you, and when I have done that, perhaps I will tell you who that guilty woman is. It will depend very much upon her, and what her conduct is in the meantime. It will depend very much upon what disposition she makes of the jewel of the Seven Stars. Now, will one of you speak for the others, and tell me what you think of it all?"

It was Herbert Payson who got slowly upon his feet.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "I think you have done some extraordinary work since you have had this case in hand. I will confess that to-night, when you pulled that bundle from my pocket, and made me think, for a moment, that you had found it there, you had me guessing. I did not know what to say or do. I know, of course, that I did not take the brooch, and it instantly occurred to me that the thief had put it in my pocket. You cannot imagine the relief it gave me when you told me that you had found it in your own pocket.

"I think this thing has been hanging over all of us like a sort of nightmare.

"You say now that the culprit is a woman; that she is one of us here. It seems incredible. Of course, it must be so, but it is awful to contemplate; and what I wish to say is this: You who are so expert in these matters, cannot you think up some means whereby that poor woman may be spared? You say you already know who she is. Very well; then, I say, go to her, have a talk with her. Tell her what you know and how

you know it. Induce her to confess her crimes, and try to lead her back into the right path. You don't think that she has stolen for the sake of gain, do you?"

"No. I could not suppose that. It could not be supposed of any person who is present in this room."

"Then what has been the incentive?"

"The mere fascination that she finds in the silent contemplation of jewels."

"But I cannot understand that."

"It is a sort of hypnotic influence which rare and curious jewels exert over her. They cry out to her: 'Take me! Take me!' and she cannot resist the temptation any more than the morphin-fiend can keep his hands off the deadly drug when it is within his reach."

"It is, then, rather a species of insanity?"

"No; call it mania, if you will—an uncontrollable mania that seizes upon her whenever there is a rare and costly gem within her reach which she may possess by merely reaching out her hand."

"But she must necessarily be exceedingly expert in the use of her hands; as expert as a pickpocket."

"Quite so; yes."

"Do I understand, Mr. Carter, that it is your desire that we should all remain here, without leaving the house, or, at least, the estate, until you have cleared up this mystery?" asked Mr. Burdette, interrupting.

"No. That is not necessary. What I do wish, however, is that all the guests would remain your guests till Wednesday, or, at least, until I have cleared this all up, and I think it will be before that time. I mean only that I would like to have them all sleep here; meet here evenings. In a word, remain your guests until then, disposing of their time as it pleases them to do so."

"I see."

"Possibly some of the gentlemen may have business affairs to call them to the city during the daytime Monday or Tuesday. Possibly one or more of the ladies may remember an engagement in the city on one of those days, or may wish to do some shopping. Very well, let it be done, only I would appreciate it if all who do go away during the day will return here at night, so that we can keep the same party together. Will you all agree to that?"

A general murmur of assent went the rounds of the table.

"For myself," continued the detective, "I shall return to the city very early in the morning, and I will take

Mr. Garvan with me. Mrs. Garvan will remain here with you, to represent us both. I hope that will be entirely satisfactory. I shall return here by dark to-morrow evening. It will be—or, rather, it is now, Sunday, you know."

"Yes. That's true."

"And it is very late. It is past three o'clock. I shall leave here at six, and now, if I may presume upon you all, I would suggest that we all go to our rooms. This has been rather an exciting evening."

They left their chairs seemingly with one accord, and within five minutes Nick found himself alone with Patsy and his host, Dickie Burdette.

"By thunder, Carter!" said the latter, when it was certain that he would not be overheard, "you certainly played a bold game to-night. I do not now see just what you were aiming at, but I suppose you do."

"Yes"—with a smile—"I see it all very plainly indeed. I was aiming at a bull's-eye in a target, and I hit it."

"Do you really know who the guilty woman is, or was that all a bluff to induce her to confess?"

"No; it was not a bluff. I was in earnest. I know—only I haven't the slightest proof. But I will tell you another thing, Burdette, if you want to hear it."

"I do, whatever it is."

"I think I know exactly where the jewel of the Seven Stars is at this moment. I mean by that that I think I know where it was concealed after it was stolen."

"You do?"

"Yes. That is to say, I know where the woman whom I think stole it was standing just before we went in to supper. She must have had it in her possession at that time, and she must have known that it might be fatal for her to retain possession of it in the dining-room. There was only one thing that she had time to do with it, if I am correct."

"And that was—what?"

"She was standing, at the time I refer to, just inside the door that opens into the conservatory, from the library, and just beyond that door is a large, potted—or, rather, a tubbed palm. The surface of the tub is covered with moss, and, if I am correct, the jewel of the Seven Stars should be at this moment reposing beneath that moss. We will go and have a look, if you like, only you must promise me that you will not touch it, and that you will not even try to look at it again until I give you leave."

"I'll promise."

"I intended to go alone to make this inspection, but I have no objection to taking you with me, if you will keep your word about letting it alone and forgetting that it is there."

"I will. I will."

"Then come on. We will find the jewel there, I am sure."

CHAPTER X.

THE HIDING-PLACE OF THE JEWEL.

It was Burdette who led the way from the dining-room through the hall, toward the library.

They had advanced almost to the foot of the wide stairway that led to the floor above, when they all at once became conscious of the rustling of skirts, as if a woman were ascending the stairs rapidly. Burdette spoke to her, for the dim light in the hall made it impossible for them to see who it was.

"Who is there?" he asked.

"It is I, Dickie," replied the unmistakable tones of Rena Payson's voice. "I was going to the library for a book, but being only half-dressed, or, rather, being half-undressed, I turned and fled when I heard you coming."

"Oh, that's all right. We were just going into the library ourselves, to have one more smoke. What book do you want? I'll get it for you, although I think you had better go to bed and to sleep at once."

"All right, Dickie. I'll try to take your advice, although I don't feel in the least like sleeping. I was reading 'The Shuttle,' Mrs. Burnette's last book. It is on the table in the library. If you will hand it to me, I will take it up-stairs."

So Dickie got the book and gave it to her; then he returned to the others in the library, and he found the detective smiling grimly. He was thinking, although he did not utter his thoughts aloud:

"If we had delayed ten minutes longer, she would have gotten the jewel of the Seven Stars before we had a chance to see it. As it is, we headed her off just in time."

Dickie closed the door carefully behind him when he reentered the library, and then he advanced to the door that communicated with the conservatory, and turned the key.

"Will you look, or shall I?" he asked, turning to the detective.

"I think perhaps you had better let me do it," replied the detective. "I am afraid that, in your eagerness, you may disturb things so that the woman will know, when she comes here to recover possession of the jewel, that some one has been here before her. I do not wish her to discover that."

He had passed through into the conservatory by now, and with deft and careful fingers he lifted the moss at one side of the tub; the side nearest to the spot where he had seen the woman standing at the time he thought she must have hidden it.

There was no necessity for looking farther.

There, blazing up at them from its earthen bed, was Adelina's jewel of the Seven Stars.

Burdette gasped and caught his breath. Patsy sighed. Nick Carter only dropped the moss back into place again.

"It is wonderful," said Dickie, when they were back again in the library, with the door closed and the key turned.

"What is wonderful?" asked Nick.

"That you should have guessed so correctly where to look for the jewel."

"On the contrary, Mr. Burdette; it is not wonderful at all. It is only solid sense. To begin with, I already knew, or, at least, believed that I knew, who had taken the jewel the moment I discovered that it was missing. I knew, of course, that the woman would not think of holding it in her personal possession a moment longer than was absolutely necessary. She certainly would not take it to the dining-room with her; and so I concentrated my mind on the task of remembering where she had been standing before we all went in to supper; I mean, if I could remember any place where she had been standing, or seated, where she could have concealed it. I remembered that I had seen her in this doorway, and I figured it out that the moss-covered tub would be the very place."

"Still, it is all very wonderful to me. I only wish we had called you into the case more than a year ago, before this affair had gone so far."

"So do I. It would have saved some heartaches."

"I wish that I could even guess who the woman is, Carter."

"I am very glad that you cannot."

"I pity her to-night, after having listened to what you said in the dining-room."

"So do I. She is not happy, you may depend upon it."

"Do you really think that you can recover all that lost property?"

"I do, else I would not have said so."

"Then you feel quite sure that she has not disposed of it?"

"I am certain that she has not. I believe that it is all hoarded where she can go to it once in the while and gloat over it. She hoards it as a miser hoards his gold. It is the gratification of the passion of possession."

"It is a terrible thing, isn't it? Oh-ho-hum! I am tired out completely. Aren't you going to bed at all, Carter?"

"Yes. Presently. I want to talk about five minutes with Patsy before I turn in, however. And say, by the way, before you go I want to ask you rather an odd question. You will think that I am changing the subject with a vengeance, but I guess it is time we changed it."

"All right. What is the question?"

"This: Ever since I went with Herbert Payson to his house the other day, I have been wondering why in the world he was persuaded to erect such an ugly-looking structure."

Dickie laughed aloud.

"I don't wonder," he said. "It is an ugly affair. We call it Payson's warehouse, you know; eh?"

"Yes. I have heard so. Who in the world was his architect?"

"A chap named Greyburn, who has his office on Fourth Avenue. No, I think he is in the Metropolitan Building now. But between you and me, I think that Herbert had very little to do with it. Rena did most of the business with the architect. He told her he was building the house for her, anyway, and she could do with it as she liked. We have no end of fun with her about it, although the house is very elegant inside. Good night, Carter."

"Good night, Burdette. I won't see you in the morning, but I expect to return before dark."

And so Nick and Patsy were at last left alone.

"Now, Patsy," said the detective, "I want to say about a dozen words to you, and then I want you to skip to your room, and leave me here."

"All right. What is it?"

"I want you to be up and ready to accompany me at six o'clock; but I don't want you to go very far. You have got stuff enough with you to rig up some sort of a disguise, haven't you?"

"No. I haven't got a thing of that kind."

"Well, I'll take you along with me as far as the village, then. You must somehow find a pair of overalls and a blouse, and return to the neighborhood of this house. Then I want you to wait around till you see Mrs. Payson start for some place. She will start, you may be assured of that, and her destination will be her own home in the city. She will not wish anybody to know that she is going there, however. As soon as she starts, you must telegraph or telephone to me of the fact. Telephone to Joseph if there is time."

"Yes. Am I to follow her?"

"Yes. It will be as well; only don't let her discover that she is followed. Don't get too close. When you have seen her safely into her own house, you may leave her and go to the Plaza Hotel. I'll pick you up there later with the car, and bring you back with me."

"I'm to wait there for you, then?"

"Yes."

"Is that all?"

"That is all."

"Are you going to leave that jewel there where it is now?"

"Sure. It won't be there long, however. She will be down again after it presently, and I want to be here to see her take it. Go to bed now. We will leave here at six sharp, and it is four now."

As soon as Patsy was gone, Nick extinguished the lights in the library. Then he unlocked the door into the conservatory—the key was always left in the lock—passed through, and with his nippers turned the key again from the opposite side, relocking it, but still leaving the key in the library side of the door.

Then he drifted a little distance away among the plants, and finally found a spot where he could conceal himself with very little chance of being discovered, but from which he would be able to see quite plainly if there should be a light in the library; and, if not, there was starlight enough through the glass of the conservatory to answer his purposes.

It was barely more than half an hour later when he heard the key turn in the lock of the door.

It opened, and on the threshold stood Rena Payson, with a candle in her hand.

She wore a silken wrapper over her night-robe. Her hair had been allowed to fall loosely down her back, and she looked wondrously beautiful as she stood there, evidently trembling, and yet determined to carry out what she had come there to do.

For a full minute, it seemed, she remained as motionless as a statue, listening, and with the candle held so that she could extinguish it on the instant; but presently she stepped forward into the conservatory, and bent over the moss-covered tub that contained the palm.

Nick raised himself a little, so that he could see the better.

He saw her as she raised the edge of the moss; heard her utter a quick gasp of pleasure, as if she had half-expected not to find her treasure; saw her put the candle down while she used that hand to pick up the glittering jewel; heard her sigh deeply; saw her press her lips passionately against the blazing jewels; heard her laugh low and exultingly; saw her seize the candle again and turn away toward the door.

But she had not passed through it when she remembered that she had left the moss somewhat disarranged, and she returned again to fix it.

This she did with exceeding care, and then she glided from the conservatory, closed the door, and turned the key again as she had found it.

Nick waited until he was sure that she had gone to her room, and then, with his nippers, he unlocked the door as he had locked it, and passed into the library.

"I was not mistaken," he was thinking. "Now, I wonder if I will be as correct in the rest of my surmises about her as I am in this one. A chap named Greyburn, eh? It ought not to be difficult to find him Sunday morning, if I get there early enough. But even if I do not find him, I must go ahead without his aid, although I confess that it would simplify matters for me very much indeed. What a complicated state of affairs, to be sure. Hello! Who's coming now, I wonder?"

He had not turned on the lights in the library. He had merely dropped into a leather rocker in one corner of the room, determined to get an hour of sleep there, if he could. His feet were upon another chair, and his head was comfortably back against the cushions.

He had not time to move when he heard the footsteps approaching, so he merely closed his eyes and

waited, pretending to be asleep, in case he were discovered; but he peeped between his lashes, just the same.

The door upon the hall opened, and Mrs. Payson reappeared, still bearing the candle. She glided slowly into the room and across it to the conservatory door. Nick heard her try it, and then breathe a sigh of relief. He heard her murmur to herself:

"I did lock it, after all."

Then she glided across the floor again toward the door, paused there for an instant, opened it and passed out, and was gone.

Her eyes had not sought the corner where Nick was lying in the chair, and she did not see him.

And then Nick Carter closed his eyes and slept.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ROOM OF A THOUSAND GEMS.

It was yet almost half an hour before daylight when Nick Carter roused himself and brought his mind to bear upon the business he had in hand.

He left the room quietly, and presently tapped lightly upon Patsy's door, to be instantly answered by his assistant.

"We will be ready for you by the time you are down, Patsy," he said; and then hurried away to the stable, to rouse Danny, his chauffeur.

And thus they got away quietly from the house, without disturbing anybody; Patsy was dropped at the village, to carry out the arrangement as outlined by the detective, and the big car sped onward toward the city.

The detective's first business when he arrived in the city was to examine the telephone directory, to discover a "chap by the name of Greyburn," who was an architect, and who had an office in the Metropolitan Building. He found it to be a certain Charles Greyburn, and he called him up immediately—literally called him up, for the architect was not yet out of bed when he was summoned to the telephone.

"I am come from Mr. Herbert Payson," the detective explained, as soon as he had apologized for the early call, "and I would be glad if you would consent to give me an interview at your house at once. It is a matter of considerable importance, else I would not have disturbed you at this hour on a Sunday morning."

And so the engagement was made, and twenty minutes later the detective and the architect were seated opposite each other, in the latter's home.

Nick was so certain that his conclusions about the matter in hand were correct that he did not begin the interview by asking questions; he began it by making demands. As soon as they were seated, he said to the architect:

"Mr. Payson wished you to show to me and to explain to me that part of the plans of his house on Fifth Avenue which has to do with the secret chamber, and all that pertains to it. It is a matter of the utmost importance that it should be attended to at once, and if the plans referred to are at your office, I will ask you to ride over there with me in my car at once, if you please."

The architect gasped, then he frowned. Nick thought that he turned a shade paler than his naturally white complexion. For a moment he seemed at a loss for words; but then he said:

"So Mr. Payson has discovered his wife's little secret, has he? Well, well, I told her that it was only a question of time when her secret would be a secret no longer. One cannot keep those things sub rosa all the time, you know. It was a perfectly harmless fancy on her part, or otherwise I would not have consented to it without Mr. Payson's knowledge. I certainly hope that Mr. Payson understands that."

"I am not in a position, Mr. Greyburn, to tell you what Mr. Payson understands about it and what he does not," replied the detective coldly. "I think, however, that I can assure you of one thing: If you go to your office with me at once, and explain the whole matter, it will probably be the last you will hear about it. If you do not—well, Mr. Payson is a man who does not like to be deceived, and he might make things unpleasant for you. It is up to you, Mr. Greyburn."

"Certainly I will go with you at once. The plans, as you suggested, are at my office, but, fortunately, we can get to them, all right."

At the office, a little later, the plans were brought forth and duly and graphically explained to the detective.

A secret room on the top floor of the house had been very cleverly planned by the architect, who had arranged his partitions so that its existence would never be suspected, unless one took careful measurements with a rule. The eye alone and unaided would never have dis-

covered that a space had been preserved out of the whole which afforded a place for the hidden chamber.

The plans showed it to be a room twelve feet square, located in the very center of the building, perfectly ventilated, and lighted by electricity.

It was approached by a secret stairway, which led downward between the partitions, to and past Mrs. Payson's private chamber; and this chamber had been finished in Old Dutch style—with a high wainscoting, so that the secret door through it into the room could be—and had been—arranged to defy detection, even if one were searching for it.

Thence the stairway led on downward to the main entrance of the building on the ground floor, and finally gave out upon the wide vestibule, where the outer doors were not closed and fastened when the family was at home.

Here again the architect had demonstrated his ability, for the secret door into the vestibule had been so cleverly concealed in the carved and decorated paneling that its existence would never have been suspected, and, if it had been, could not have been discovered short of tearing the walls apart.

The detective spent an hour with the now half-frightened and thoroughly disturbed architect, during which every secret of the place and the mechanism that worked the secret doors were explained to him; and when at last he took his departure he carried the plans with him.

In parting with the architect, he said:

"Mr. Greyburn, there is just one more point concerning which I will caution you, and that is that you are not to mention this interview to any person whatever. You must continue to keep inviolate the secrets you have held so long, and you are not to mention to Mrs. Payson, or to make known to her in any way, the fact that you have been approached on this subject. I trust that I may tell Mr. Payson, when I talk with him about it, that he can rely upon your discretion?"

"You certainly can."

"In that case I will assure you that you will hear no more about this subject. Good morning, sir."

It was nine o'clock already, and Nick felt that he had very little time to spare; but he considered it necessary to hasten around to his own house to find what Patsy had sent to him by telephone. After that—well, his plans were already matured.

Patsy had sent a telephonic message. It was:

"Mrs. Payson left here in her automobile at seven-forty-five. I think she was bound for New York. I am leaving here on the eight-ten train."

Nick realized that if he succeeded in carrying out his plans, there was no time to lose, and so he hurried from the house, and had himself driven to the corner of the avenue next below the Payson mansion, where he got out and walked, telling Danny to wait where he was until his return.

Then he walked directly to the Paysons' home.

He was perfectly well aware, when he ascended the steps, that it was more than likely that one of the servants or footmen would be near the door and would see him through the glass as he approached; but he had something ready to say in case that did happen. He had figured, however, that the family being away over Sunday, and none of them expected to return, the servants would not be as religiously on duty as if the master or mistress was at home, and that there was, therefore, a chance that he might enter the vestibule and operate the secret spring of the hidden door without being seen.

As he entered the vestibule he paused there and waited a full minute, thus giving any servant who might have discovered him an opportunity to open the great door.

But there was no such discovery. It was evident that there was no footman within view of the door, and, satisfied of this, the detective stepped to the right, pressed aside a carved cluster of grapes, pushed upon a short lever that was concealed behind it, and in another instant disappeared beyond the carved woodwork, which slid noiselessly back again into place, leaving no trace whatever of the strange happening.

Before him now was utter darkness, but he felt for the electric switch that he knew was there, turned it, and flooded the place with light, thus revealing the narrow stairway that led upward at an easy incline between the partitions of the house.

The stairs were thickly carpeted, and gave forth no sound whatever beneath his tread. The walls on either side of him were covered with green plush, glued against them. There had been no lack of elegance even in the finishing of this secret stairway.

He arrived at the first landing, where there was another door, plainly visible from this side of it. He knew it to be the one which led into the Old Dutch bedroom of the mistress of the house.

But his errand was not there, and he did not touch the door.

Instead, he turned another electric switch, thus lighting the way beyond him, and then another one still to extinguish the lights he had just passed; and then he continued on his journey toward the top of the house, where the secret room was located—toward that room in which he now knew he would find all the stolen jewels that had caused so much disturbance among the Infallibles.

Here again his familiarity with the plans rendered it easy for him to operate the secret springs and latches, and in another moment, after extinguishing the lights in the secret stairway, he pushed open the door and entered the hidden chamber.

The turning of still another switch flooded the place with brilliant light, and the detective uttered a gasp of astonishment at the spectacle by which he was confronted.

The walls, the ceiling, and the floor were covered with tightly drawn and firmly glued black velvet. There was not a particle of color anywhere to relieve it.

In the middle of the room was a small library-table of ebony and the top of this table was also covered with black velvet. A large, comfortable, ebony rocker, upholstered in black leather, stood at one side of the table; at the opposite side was a stool of the same material. Over in one of the corners was a huge, black leather couch and a pillow in a black satin case.

In the ceiling above the center of the room was a cluster of electric lights, and there were others in each corner near the ceiling—and such was the room into which he had intruded that Sunday morning.

But it was not the room itself that caused the gasp of astonishment when he turned on the lights.

Directly before him, against the black velvet walls, blazed the fires of a thousand gems.

There were diamonds, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, pearls—every precious stone was represented, and there were quantities of each kind. There were tiaras of mixed stones, necklaces, bracelets, brooches, clasps, collars, pins; in short, every conceivable ornament worn by woman was there, so long as it contained precious stones to blaze out upon the eye from its background of blackest velvet.

The detective knew as he looked that only a very small portion of what he saw before him could be accounted for

by the thefts that had taken place among the Infallibles. But possibly there were other thefts as well, of which he had heard nothing. He did not know.

Or it was possible, on the other hand, that the woman might have had this room constructed because of a perfectly legitimate desire to satisfy her craving and her passion for hoarding precious stones, and passing hours at a time in contemplation of them, in secret. It was possible that her own money and her husband's had purchased legally the greater quantity of these treasures. It was possible—

His train of thought came to an abrupt termination. Something told him—a sixth sense that occasionally warned him of approaching events—that Rena Payson was near.

He turned off the lights quickly. Then he glided into a corner near the door and stood straight, with his back against the wall, waiting.

A moment later the secret door swung open, the lights were turned on again, and Rena Payson stepped into the room of a thousand gems.

CHAPTER XII.

THE RESTORATION OF THE JEWELS.

She did not at once discover his presence there, although he stood directly behind her, and almost within reach of her hand, unconcealed.

Her whole attention was riveted upon the contemplation of her treasures, and she stood as one who is fascinated anew by something that is passionate pleasure.

Her lips were parted, her eyes glowed with rapture, her breathing was deep and quick, her very soul seemed to be absorbed in what she saw and what she felt. There are people who are affected in this manner by certain strains of music, by certain chords of harmony, but never before had Nick Carter believed that the human eye could discover in the contemplation of precious stones the gratification of every passionate hope and longing.

It was here, however, thoroughly depicted.

The woman was transformed. Her cheeks glowed; her eyes shone, and her parted lips and spasmodic breathing, her rapt absorption, and the heightened beating of her heart, told only too well of the effect that all this had upon her.

After a moment she moved forward and dropped upon

the big chair. Then she sighed deeply and closed her eyes.

Nick did not move. He was afraid to disturb her just then; afraid of the effect it might have upon her; so he waited, hoping that presently she would rouse herself and discover him.

She did move, presently, but as yet she did not turn her head to discover him.

Instead she opened the chatelaine bag she carried at her belt, and took from it a package wrapped in tissue-paper. A moment later she held it at arm's-length, so that she could study it, Adelina's antique ornament which was called the jewel of the Seven Stars.

After an interval of silent contemplation, she rose from the chair, and, crossing to the wall, pinned it against the velvet directly beneath the spot where her own Maltese cross, of which she had not hesitated to rob herself, was fastened. Then she backed away from it and studied the effect; and then—then she wheeled suddenly around, exactly as she might have done had Nick spoken to her, and stared straight into the detective's eyes.

Neither spoke. A moment, fraught with unthinkable possibilities, passed in that manner, and then, without warning of any kind, the woman collapsed upon the floor in a dead faint.

Nick carried her to the couch and laid her upon it. Then he fanned her with part of a newspaper that he carried in his pocket; but it was a long time before her eyelids began to quiver with returning consciousness.

She had evidently been conscious for a considerable length of time, and had managed to conceal the fact, before she spoke, for she did so in a quiet, contained voice, that assured the detective she had been thinking over what she should say and do in her present dilemma.

"You told the truth, then, Mr. Carter?" she said. "You did know the identity of the thief; and you did know where the stolen property was concealed."

"I knew you were the woman who was responsible, Mrs. Payson," he replied, not unkindly. "I guessed about the disposition of the missing property."

"I did not believe you; and yet, you frightened me. I will not ask you how you made your discoveries; it is not necessary, now that you know all."

"No; it is not necessary."

"I suppose, now, that I am to be placed under arrest and taken to a cell, somewhere. Is that to be my fate, Mr. Carter?"

"It surely ought to be your fate, Mrs. Payson; and yet there are circumstances which might modify it. If you will tell me your story, truthfully and entirely, without reservation, it will be better for you, and it will enlighten me in regard to my duty in this crisis."

"Yes," she replied dreamily, "I will tell you my story. It is not a long one, although I think you will agree with me that it is a rare one." He nodded, and she continued:

"I worship jewels, Mr. Carter. I have a passion for rare and precious gems that is ungovernable and uncontrollable. All my life, since I was a little girl, I have collected them and hidden them away where no one but myself could see them. I wanted them to myself, just as a woman wants her lover to herself. The mere fact that you are here in this room now, where you can feast your eyes upon the jewels that are before you, fills me with a jealous rage that is almost overpowering. Can you understand that?"

"I think so—since I have seen you come in here among them, believing yourself to be unobserved."

"My father was many times a millionaire, and he gave me a large income. I spent it all for jewels. When he died and left me a fortune of my own, I added steadily to my collection. Formerly I had a room set apart in my father's house in which I kept my treasures, and into which none but myself was allowed to penetrate. After I was married, I kept that great mansion untenanted in order to keep that room inviolate; and then when my husband permitted me to have this house built to suit my own tastes. I saw in his permission the opportunity to gratify the dream and the passion of my life.

"I bribed the architect with a large bonus to do as I desired, and this room is the result of it. There are more than three million dollars' worth of gems in this room, Mr. Carter, and every one of them was bought and paid for with my own money until—until a little more than a year ago. Do you believe me?"

"Yes," he replied gently. "I believe you, Mrs. Payson."

"Thank you. I don't think I can make you understand how it happened that I fell, but the beginning was an accident. I had been talking with one of the ladies of our set when a very beautiful ornament that she wore became detached from its fastenings and dropped among the draperies of my own costume, where it caught and hung.

"I saw it fall; I saw it lodge among my own garments—and I kept silent. Presently I moved away from the group, and, when I was alone and unobserved, I possessed myself of the ornament. Mr. Carter, I simply had not the power to return it to its owner. I kept it. I brought it here to this room and added it to my collection. That was the beginning.

"From that moment I began to covet every rare jewel that I saw. I began to study out how I could possess myself of them. I don't know if you are familiar with the sophistry one will make use of in stilling the conscience, but I used to tell myself that they were all as rich as I, and the mere money loss was nothing.

"Another opportunity came to me one night, not so easy as the first one, for this time I actually stole what I coveted, and I fell the second time; and after that I began to study how I could accomplish the thefts of the articles I desired.

"You know when one begins to slide down an incline, the farther one goes, the more rapid and certain becomes the descent. It was so with me. I marked every jewel among my friends that I coveted, and I only awaited opportunities to possess myself of them. Pshaw! To steal them; that is the proper word."

She started from the couch suddenly and crossed to the jewel of the Seven Stars, which she removed from the wall.

"This, for example, to show you how I have planned," she said, holding it out to him. "I saw and admired it, Friday evening. I asked Mrs. Garvan to show it to me. As I took it in my hand, I held in my palm a tiny pair of nippers with which, when she was not observing me, I snipped off enough of the guard so that I could easily detach it when the chance should be mine. That chance came last night. I tell you about this particular case to demonstrate to you the depths into which I have fallen; but now I will tell you another thing.

"When I entered this room this morning, it was with the determination to restore all the property I have stolen to the rightful owners. Doubtless you have a list of them; if you have not I can supply you with one. In that book over there every article I have stolen is enumerated, together with the name of the owner, the date of the theft, and a description of the jewel itself. Don't misunderstand me. I had no idea of confessing; but I was resolved that the stolen property must be returned this very day. I intended to confess to one person and

to ask him to restore the property for me. I intended to confess to my brother."

"Your brother!" exclaimed Nick involuntarily.

"Perhaps I should have said my half-brother. I refer to Dickie Burdette. Didn't you know that he is my half-brother? My mother had been married before she became my father's wife. She died when I was born. I intended to tell Dickie the whole horrible story, and to ask him to help me cure myself of this terrible sin; to redeem myself from the consequences of my acts. Dickie is good. He would have understood, and he would have helped me. And, Mr. Carter, there isn't one among my friends who would not forgive me if they knew the whole awful truth; not one."

"I believe you are right about that, Mrs. Payson. Shall we go together to your brother, with all the stolen jewels, and will you tell him the story in my presence? If you will, we will afterward adhere to any plan for the return of the jewels that he may outline."

"Yes," she cried out, with sudden determination, "of course! At once. Take the book, Mr. Carter. Read off the list to me, and as you read it I will put the articles together. Then you shall take charge of them. There are twenty of them, you will find; this jewel of Adeline's makes the twenty-first, but that is not entered in the book.

* * * * *

That Sunday night at the "Fells" was a memorable one.

One by one the women who had suffered losses at the hands of Mrs. Payson were called into the library, where Nick Carter and Dickie Burdette sat alone to receive them. To each one was given her property, and to each one was told the truth about its loss; and about the remorse and regret and despair of her who had taken them. Mrs. Payson's name was not concealed from those who had been deprived of their property, for upon this much Dickie insisted; but it was kept from the others who were not concerned, and is to them a mystery to this day. Even Mrs. Payson herself was called into the room to have her Maltese cross returned to her.

And so the mystery of that section of the "400" that is known as the "Infallibles" was unveiled.

THE END.

The next number (284) will contain "A Million Dollars Reward; or, Nick Carter's Process of Lichation."



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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

Surf-riding is one of the great sports of all the South Sea islands. The natives are experts, both with boards and in canoes. White men become expert with canoes, but rarely with boards. The canoes are dug out of big logs. They are very deep and narrow, and seats are stepped near the gunwale, so that they would tip over at a glance if it were not for the enormous outriggers they carry. Across the gunwales are lashed two short sticks, one fore and one aft, which extend about eight feet out on the port side and curve down into the water, where they are fastened to a four-inch log of an extremely buoyant native wood. Getting swamped is very dangerous business, for the surf booms in so rapidly and heavily that it is an impossibility to bail out the canoe, and it must be taken to the beach, a task of great proportions in a heavy sea, and one that demands that the men with the canoe shall be good swimmers. The canoes rarely upset, but unless a comber is handled well it is likely to break over the craft and fill it with water, and then there is trouble.

The canoe is manned usually by two dusky Kanakas, who can fairly smell a big breaker long before it lifts its head above the sea. Some white men born in Honolulu are nearly as expert as the Kanakas. I went out with Billy Dimond, who has spent nearly his whole life in Honolulu, and as Tao-hai, one of his Kanakas, says, is a "ver' good man." We paddled along the beach to a place where the surf was running high, then out to sea until we were beyond the line of the breakers.

There we lay watching the sea, which was so quiet that I could hardly distinguish the long, regular heave of the Pacific swell. The whole of us were in bathing-suits, with pajama coats to prevent the sun from burning, and a conglomeration of skull caps, toques, and straw hats for head-gear. The Kanakas wore bright yellow sweaters and gaudy

bandanna handkerchiefs tied on their heads as turbans. The canoes were bright yellow, the colors of the sweaters, trimmed with a black line at the gunwales. The day was bright and fair, with the usual storm over Punchbowl, the mountain back of Honolulu, and little clouds breaking away from it occasionally and drifting down toward Diamond Head.

Suddenly Dimond began to shout to his two men in Kanaka. Instantly a feeling of wild confusion and excitement pervaded the canoe. The Kanakas drove home the broad paddles and shouted in the Hawaiian language. Straight toward shore we drove the big canoe, almost lifting it out of the water. The long, broad-bladed paddles whipped through the water, and the shouting was more like Indian war-cries than anything else I have ever heard.

All abreast, the four canoes shot in toward the beach. The paddles ripped the clear blue water. The spray dashed over the bows. Everybody yelled. No one looked behind, but all knew that the big, rolling sea was overtaking us. If we did not have sufficient way on the canoe the comber would go by us and we should be left the objects of derision of all the yelling crews that caught us. How we yelled a mixture of Kanaka and English, everybody shouting at full lung power, the Kanaka exclamations coming with sharp, explosive force that contrasted with the slower English, like the crack of six-pounders with the roar of guns! On we go, and there's hardly time to notice that we are just a little ahead of the other three canoes when "There she comes!" shouts Dimond.

There is a sudden lifting of the stern of the canoe, an instant response in the yells of the crew, a lightning increase in speed, and we've caught the roller. The others have caught it also, and all four abreast we dash ahead. Now paddles are at rest, and down the inshore side of the roller we slide, always just ahead of and just under the curling crest that breaks into foam almost under the sharp stern of the canoe.

The speed is tremendous. From the sharp outwater of the canoe the foam flies in two lines right up to the crest of the roller. The spray dashes over us in streams. And all the time everybody yells. It is like the performance of an amateur fire department trying to scare out a fire by noise. It is half a mile to the beach, but there is hardly time to catch sight of that gorgeous rainbow under the black cloud that hangs over Diamond Head, we are in so quickly.

The beach is now twenty yards away. Down goes Dimond's paddle to port, hard held against the rushing sea. Off to port we swing and slide to the beach in line, in half a foot of water. Skillfully managed were the other canoes also. At the instant that we swung to port they swung to starboard, and now all head back toward the reef where the breakers start. We are standing up in the canoes, drenched with the salt spray, but yelling like Indians with the pure joy of it. A sport for kings, but one that few kings know, and most of these the world regards as civilized.

Out beyond the reef again, waiting for another swell! Down through the grass-clear water we see the coral growing at the bottom. Over the big Kanaka goes, over, yellow sweater, red bandanna and all. The little column of bubbles

that followed his descent has all disappeared, and down at the bottom we see him tugging at a coral bunch. Presently up he comes with a beautiful great piece of coral, and a broad smile on his face.

He is about to dive again when Dimond shouts to him in apparent excitement. A seaward look shows no appearance of a swell to me, but in climbs the Kanaka with all haste, and at the paddles we go, might and main. The other canoes lying farther inshore take the warning and dart away.

We are going now at racing speed, and just in time. The swell behind us has developed into a giant. Just as it begins we catch it and away we rush for the beach. It is the first race over again, but this fellow is bigger. The bow of the canoe dips under water. Instant shouts from Dimond and the Kanakas, and all three paddles are jammed into the water, holding hard, to stop the tremendous headway. The moment's check serves the purpose. The long stem of the canoe rides on top again, and on we go.

Now we are shown a trick that requires consummate skill and judgment. Mr. Dimond drives down his paddle broad across the course. Sharp off to port swings the canoe on the very top of the giant roller. The foam breaks all about us and gallons of it come aboard. The Kanakas laugh and shout, but the passengers hold their breath. The outrigger rides free of the water and we are now on top of the wave, rolling beachward beam on. Still Dimond holds his paddle hard to port. Presently the canoe answers. The outrigger drops into the sea again, the roller passes out from under us and leaves us headed out to sea.

"This is what we would have to do," he said quietly, "if we saw a swamped canoe just ahead of us."

Camels are not like horses. If a horse does not want to do anything we make him. If a camel does not want to do anything he leaves it undone. No amount of coaxing, no amount of cruelty, will make him budge. He has the determination of a mule combined with the strength of an elephant. A camel is one of those aggravating brutes which will drive a hot-tempered man to distraction. Nothing will persuade him to listen to reason. He will oppose your will with a passive resistance that is absolutely unconquerable.

The only way to treat a camel is to humor if you cannot lumbag him. They will often lie down if you load them with the proverbial last straw, and you might beat them to death or offer up all the pleasures of paradise before they would get up. They are pig-headed beasts. Sometimes when they have quite a light load they turn nasty and throw themselves to the ground. But although they are obstinate they are not cute, and an Arab, by pretending to submit, can generally get the better of the stubborn beasts. The driver will ostentatiously remove three or four packages from the load, and the animal, with an inward chuckle of satisfaction, rises at once without perceiving that the parcels have meanwhile been returned to their former place. As he flatters himself he has shirked some of his duty he swings away with a light heart, gratified beyond measure, like a spoiled child, at having his own way.

The camel is an unsocial beast. He is also habitually dull, except when he is sniffing the salt air of the desert.

When he is treading the sands, with the burning sun on his back and the boundless waste before him, he feels himself at home. The immense heat makes him bubble over with pleasure, and fills his frame with a sublime intoxication. It has been stated on the best authority that he can go nine days without water. And if you had ever seen a camel drink when he does get a chance of quenching his thirst, you would not be surprised at this. They have been known to put away seven gallons and a half at a time.

Adventures in the Jungle.

During the dry season of 1872 I was spending a few weeks at the little town of Amherst, on the coast of the Gulf of Martaban, at the mouth of the Salwan River. A man-eating tiger had taken up his abode in the vicinity of the village, and so bold and fatal had his depredations become that a perfect panic reigned among the superstitious natives, who declared that no mere tiger could be so cunning in escaping all traps and so fiendish in his bloody deeds, and that it was a demon in the form of a tiger that was preying upon them. My friend, Lieutenant Harbish, of the grenadiers, joined me at the end of my first week in the place, and, as he was fully as enthusiastic a sportsman as myself, we were not long in planning a campaign for ridding the village of their terrible enemy. We first sent for the head man of the village, and directed him to have proclamation made by means of the town-crier that we proposed to kill the man-eater, and would pay double wages for a few first-class hunters to assist us. By sunset we had, by dint of persuasion, extra wages, and the natural desire for vengeance among those who had suffered in their own families from the ravages of the beast, got together about a score of men much above the average of Burmese hunters, and armed with everything from a dull hog-spear to an antiquated army musket.

The sun was less than an hour above the horizon the next morning when we passed beyond the boundaries of the village and entered the narrow paths which penetrated the dense jungle. We divided our force into groups of two or three individuals, giving orders to spread our lines at first, and gradually converge toward a prominent hill some miles distant, near which the tiger was supposed to have his lair. If the beast was started, the word was to be passed along the line as quickly as possible, and all were to close toward the indicated point with all speed. We had been slowly advancing for over an hour, and the heat was becoming uncomfortable as the sun rose higher, when far away to the left we heard two or three musket-shots, followed by shouts, which quickly passed from group to group along the scattered line, until we knew that the tiger had been started and brought to bay.

As fast as the nature of the jungle would permit we made our way to the spot, guided by the incessant clamor of our men, which grew louder and louder as the successive groups came in and added their voices to the chorus. We found our men gathered around a patch of dense, thorny jungle, which occupied the center of a broad, grassy opening in the forest. This dense growth was probably an acre in extent, and so closely were its thorny bamboos laced and interlaced together by rattan vines, and creepers of every sort, that it really looked as if anything larger than a bird would have difficulty in making its way through the matted mass. Here and there were low, tunnellike paths formed by the game, and in one of these the enormous tracks of the tiger could be plainly seen, freshly marked in the moist earth. Several of our men had plainly seen the great cat as he dashed into the cover, and there could be no mistake that we had the right tiger covered, for he bore certain marks which, as well as his unusual size, identified him beyond question. We consulted for a few minutes as to the best method of proceeding, and, as Harbish and several natives advised setting fire to the copse, we made a trial of that plan, all hands standing with our weapons ready for instant use, expecting the quarry to be driven from his lair by the flames and smoke. But the foliage was too green, and our fire quickly died away without effecting our purpose, and all the natives but one strongly urged us to abandon the chase for the day, hoping for better luck next time. That one man, a tall, stalwart fellow called Shuwayo, was a noted hunter of the region, and, moreover, was smarting under the loss of a near relative, who had been dragged to a horrible death by this tiger, and he proposed a plan which, by its very audacity, at once captivated Harbish and myself.

His idea was to leave most of the men stationed around the outer edge of the little piece of jungle, while three of us—the lieutenant, Shuwayo, and I—were to boldly force our way into the tiger's citadel, and either kill him outright or compel him to break cover, when we might expect a good account of him from the men on guard outside. The older natives vigorously protested that such an undertaking meant certain death to all who entered that dark thicket, but I was not as old then as I am now, and Harbish, being equally as rash, we adopted Shuwayo's suggestion.

I chose the path in which the tiger's tracks were to be seen, while the others took those nearest me on either hand. We left our rifles outside, as the paths we had to follow were so low, as well as narrow and tortuous, that most of our progress was made on all fours, and a gun would have been worse than useless. We each carried a heavy six-chambered revolver, and felt no fear of being unable to put the tiger to flight, or kill him in case he stood his ground. It was ticklish work, I can tell you. The interlaced foliage overhead was so thick that I crawled along in a deep twilight that was almost total darkness. To add to my trouble, the track, or tunnel, that I was following took so many short turns that

it was seldom that I could see six feet in advance. All was still as death, and if I was not afraid of being laughed at I should certainly have beaten a retreat, and I have many times wished that I had done so. Suddenly the silence was broken by a hoarse, rumbling growl, for all the world like distant thunder. That it was close at hand I knew, but there is an element of ventriloquism about the voice of a tiger, in common with the cries of many other wild beasts, that rendered me unable to decide with any certainty either the distance or direction from whence the sound came. I peered into the twilight on every side, but could see nothing, and in the silence I could distinctly hear the throbbing of my heart. Then, instead of a growl, the very air vibrated with a savage roar, and I caught the sound of a spring, the bursting of some heavy body through the thick growth close ahead of me, and, horrible to tell, a groan of pain and agony which I knew proceeded from Harbish.

I was frantic with a desire to reach my friend and rescue him from the tiger's fangs before life should be crushed out of him, and I shouted wildly to Shuwayo and struggled madly to force my way through the few feet of distance that separated me from the brave boy in the tiger's clutches. In a moment I recovered my wits, and set to work again on all fours and made all haste to the rescue. I was thus creeping forward when, just as my head projected around one of the innumerable angles of the path, I received a crushing blow on my shoulder. It was the tiger, and if that blow had hit my head instead of my shoulder, I should not be here telling about it. As it was, my pistol was knocked out of my hand, and I had just time to throw my left arm over my head as some slight protection, when down came that great paw again, and there I was flat on my face, with the fetid breath of the man-eater hot on my neck, as helpless as ever was a mouse under the claws of a cat.

I tried to move myself backward a little, thinking that I might get my right hand on to my pistol, and so free myself; but my captor was far too sharp for that, and nothing but my left arm saved me from instant death as he struck me again with that cruel paw. This time he did not stop with a blow, but seized my arm in his mouth, and with devilish deliberation, as it seemed to me, crushed the flesh and bones from the wrist to the elbow. The agony drew a cry from me, in spite of my efforts to suppress it, and that cry probably saved my life, for it guided our brave Shuwayo to my rescue. It seemed an age to me then, though it could have been but a few seconds, before the Burman reached the spot. The tiger, being very pleasantly engaged with me, neglected to properly guard his flanks, and the hunter was able to hold his heavy pistol within a foot of the beast's ear and blow the brute's brains out at one shot.

The sound of that shot was the last thing I remembered for some time. When I recovered consciousness I found myself in my bed at the bungalow. My left arm had been amputated at the elbow, and I was doomed to travel through life with the empty sleeve that you see. Harbish, poor fellow, had been terribly torn by the claws and teeth of the tiger, though he had been spared the loss of any limb. When the men entered the copse they found both Harbish and me under the dead tiger, and had dragged us out, as they supposed, dead, too, and indeed I doubt if any two rash hunters ever behaved the tiger in his den as recklessly as we did and lived to tell about it.

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